mary-kate olsen
ashley olsen
so little time
get real
Win a
aptop computer!
Details inside.
www.mary-kateandashley.com
BASED
ON THE HIT
TV SERIES
THRIFTBOOKS

ISBN 0-06-059514-0

EAN

mary-kate olsen ashley olsen

so little time

Win a laptop computer!

Details on page 115.

Check out these other great

so little time

titles:

Book 1: **how to train a boy**
Book 2: **instant boyfriend**
Book 3: **too good to be true**
Book 4: **just between us**
Book 5: **tell me about it**
Book 6: **secret crush**
Book 7: **girl talk**
Book 8: **the love factor**
Book 9: **dating game**
Book 10: **a girl's guide to guys**
Book 11: **boy crazy**
Book 12: **best friends forever**
Book 13: **love is in the air**
Book 14: **spring breakup**

Coming soon!

Book 16: **surf holiday**

ATTENTION: ORGANIZATIONS AND CORPORATIONS
Most HarperEntertainment books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases, sales promotions, premiums, or fund-raising. For information please call or write:
Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers,
10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022-5299
Telephone: (212) 207-7528 Fax: (212) 207-7222

mary-kate olsen **ashley** olsen

so little time

get real

By Jacqueline Carroll

Based on the series created by Eric Cohen and Tonya Hurley

HarperEntertainment
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

A Parachute Press Book

A PARACHUTE PRESS BOOK

Parachute Publishing, L.L.C.
156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 302
New York, NY 10010

Published by
HarperEntertainment
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022-5299

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold or destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

Copyright © 2004 Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC. All rights reserved.

SO LITTLE TIME, characters, names and all related indicia are trademarks of and © Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC.

All photography copyright © 2004 Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC. All rights reserved.

SO LITTLE TIME books are created and produced by Parachute Publishing, L.L.C., in cooperation with Dualstar Publications, a division of Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC, published by HarperEntertainment, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

TM & © 2004 Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022-5299.

ISBN 0-06-059514-0

HarperCollins®, ≡®, and HarperEntertainment™ are trademarks of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

First printing: October 2004

Printed in the United States of America

Visit HarperEntertainment on the World Wide Web at
www.harpercollins.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

chapter one

"Don't you just love Fridays?" Chloe Carlson asked, taking three cartons of frozen yogurt from the fridge to the kitchen table. "They're totally the best day of the week!"

"Fridays are definitely good. But the best?" Tara Jordan, one of Chloe's closest friends, thought aloud as she plucked three spoons from the drawer. "I'd have to say the best days are Saturdays—no school."

"Absolutely," Quinn Reyes, Chloe's other best friend, agreed. She plopped some napkins onto the table. "No getting up at the uncivilized hour of six on Saturdays."

"Good point," Chloe said. "But once you hit Saturday, you can't look forward to it anymore. That's one of the best things about Friday—anticipation."

"Speaking of anticipation . . . yum!" Tara pried the lid off the banana yogurt. Chloe and Quinn opened their

own cartons, strawberry for Chloe, raspberry for Quinn.

Chloe slipped off her beaded flip-flops, propped up her feet, and sighed happily. She really did love Fridays. And what a great week it had been—no bad hair days, an A on her English essay, and a sweet good-bye kiss from her boyfriend, Lennon Porter.

[Chloe: Not good-bye forever, just for one week. Which is way too long, in my opinion, but what can I do? Lennon and the rest of the debate team are at a statewide competition in Sacramento. I'll really, really miss him. In the meantime, though, there's a weekend to plan!]

Planning the weekend was another thing Chloe loved about Fridays. Sitting around with Tara and Quinn, deciding what to do—it was practically a ritual. If one of them was sick or busy and couldn't be in on the plans, it just didn't feel the same.

We're like the Three Musketeers, Chloe decided, smiling happily. All for one and one for all.

"Okay, down to business." Chloe pushed her long blond hair back from her face. "What's up for tonight? How about the mall? We can check out that new Glam and Glitter store. They have great nail polish and makeup."

Quinn nodded eagerly, her dark hair swinging against her cheeks. "We can check out guys, too," she said with a grin. "Or at least Tara and I can. Maybe Rick

Northrup will be there. Or Doug Weyman. He and Sherry Givens broke up, you know."

"Get out! When?" Tara asked.

"Yesterday," Quinn reported, scooping up the last spoonful of her yogurt. "I heard Sherry talking about it today in P.E."

"They weren't together very long," Chloe noted. "What happened?"

Quinn shrugged. "No details. But Sherry said it was mutual, so I guess nobody's heart got broken."

"So Doug Weyman is free," Tara said thoughtfully. "He's pretty cute. Ooh, and so is Brian O'Keefe," she added, her gray eyes sparkling.

Chloe tried to picture Brian O'Keefe. "Oh, right. That dark-haired guy in your math class."

"Mmm." Tara sighed dreamily. "He's a real hottie. And he's totally my type—smart, funny, and adorable, in that Nick Lachey kind of way."

Chloe laughed. "And that makes you who, Jessica Simpson?"

"I wish!" Tara quipped.

Chloe scraped the bottom of her yogurt carton, too. "Okay, so it's settled then. We're going to the mall. You two look for guys, and I'll look for nail polish."

"Hey, everybody." Riley, Chloe's twin sister, came into the kitchen and made a beeline for the refrigerator. "What's happening?"

"We're figuring out the weekend," Chloe told her. "Tonight's a mall-crawl. Want to come with us?"

"I can't," Riley said. She pulled out a bottle of Lime Sparkle and took a sip. "I'm meeting Charlie at the Newsstand later, but first I have to work on the time capsule project."

"Oh, right!" Chloe said. In just a few weeks the students at West Malibu High, where she and Riley were freshmen, were going to bury a time capsule in the quad. Riley had volunteered to be on the capsule committee.

"Have you decided what you're going to put in?" Chloe asked.

"Not yet," Riley admitted. "That's what I need to work on. I mean, pretend you're opening the time capsule a hundred years from now. Then picture what you find inside. What really special thing would tell you what we're all about?"

"Cool clothes," Chloe said instantly.

[Chloe: I know, that's not *all* we're about. But I can't help it. When somebody says *special*, I think clothes.]

"Music, too," Tara suggested. "Hey, how about an MP3 player?"

"And a cell phone," Quinn added.

"Right! We're the wireless generation," Chloe said. "In cool clothes, of course."

"Those are good ideas, but there's one tiny problem," Riley said. "I don't have an MP3 player. And if I did, no way would I bury it *and* my cell phone in a time capsule." She frowned. "I guess I could put in photographs of those things. Oh, I don't know. Listen, while you're at the mall, look for some inspiration, would you? Cool jewelry, movie posters—whatever."

As Riley hurried out of the kitchen, Chloe turned to her friends. "Okay, tonight's set," she said. "What about tomorrow night?"

"Ellie Farber's party," Quinn reminded her.

"Boring," Tara declared.

Chloe had to agree. She liked Ellie Farber, but an Ellie Farber party was one big yawn. She always played outdated music. And she tried to organize everybody into teams so they could play lame games.

"You know, there hasn't been a really great party in ages," Chloe said, licking the back of her spoon. "I think we all deserve one, don't you?"

"Definitely," Quinn agreed. "Like a beach party. Dancing, playing in the water, lots of yummy food and great music!"

"Lots of boys, too," Tara chimed in.

"This place is perfect for a party like that," Chloe said. The Carlsons' home in Malibu, California, was only steps from the beach. "We could set up tables and grills on the deck. And get some really cool decorations, too."

"And we can invite tons of kids, because it'll be mostly outside," Tara added. "Oh, and we should definitely invite Brian O'Keefe! He's probably an excellent dancer."

"*And* Rick Northrup *and* Doug Weyman," Quinn said.

"Let's do it!" Chloe exclaimed. "I'll have to ask Mom, but I'm sure she'll say yes. We can pool our money for decorations and food and everything."

"I'm in," Quinn said. "When?"

"How about next Saturday?" Tara suggested. "Nobody's having a party then."

"Well, now *we* are!" Chloe grinned. "A super, fantastic, talk-about-it-for-weeks blast!"

"Okay, Pepper, what do you think?" Riley asked. She glanced at the family cocker spaniel, who had followed her into the bedroom she shared with Chloe. "What should I put into the time capsule?"

Riley tossed an armful of tees, short-shorts, and capris onto her bed. They landed next to a plastic box filled with blush, brushes, and eye shadow, which was next to a stack of CDs, a set of Tolkien books, a school calendar, and dozens of snapshots from Riley's bulletin board.

"Does any of this grab you, Pepper?" Riley asked. "Like, does something just scream *West Malibu High freshman*?"

And am I actually asking my dog? she wondered.

Pepper yawned and curled up on her red doggie cushion in the corner.

Riley ran her fingers through her straight blond hair and stared at the mess piled high on her bed. After leaving Chloe, Tara, and Quinn in the kitchen, she'd come upstairs determined to figure out her personal contribution to the time capsule.

The problem was nothing seemed right.

"Riley, tell me my eyes aren't deceiving me!" a Spanish-accented voice suddenly called out. Manuelo Del Valle, the Carlsons' full-time housekeeper/cook, stood in the doorway. He stared at the pile of stuff on Riley's bed with a gleam of delight in his brown eyes. "Are you truly excavating your closet?"

"I hate to disappoint you, Manuelo, but no. Maybe for your birthday," she offered with a grin.

"What a lovely gift that would be!" Manuelo gave an exaggerated sigh of regret. Then he held up the family's new digital camcorder and aimed it at Riley. "Say *cheese*, please."

"Cheese, please," Riley said with a grin. "What are you doing?"

"I've decided to go into filmmaking," Manuelo declared. "This one will be called *Messy Rooms: A Housekeeper's Descent into Madness*."

Riley rolled her eyes. "Seriously."

"Seriously, your mother found herself with time to think, and she had a brainstorm," Manuelo explained, aiming the camera at the girls' computer. "She decided

it was time to update the insurance policy on the house. She asked me to videotape everything in it."

[Riley: Mom is always superbusy. When she and Dad separated, she took over their fashion design business. Dad wanted a simpler life, and he now lives in a trailer on the beach. Between you and me, the "simple life" mostly means long walks and lots of meditation. Don't get me wrong, Dad's really happy, and Mom's really happy, and they're still friends, so that makes Chloe and *me* happy. Anyway, Mom is always in fast-forward mode, so when she has even five seconds of downtime, she looks for something to do—like updating the insurance policy on the house.]

"What *are* you doing, if not cleaning?" Manuelo asked, videotaping her bookshelves. "Having a garage sale? Looking for your other periwinkle leather flip-flop?"

Riley glanced up. "How do you know I'm missing a flip-flop?" she asked.

"Because it's been out on the back deck all week," he replied. He reached into his back pocket and tossed the blue flip-flop in question onto the bed. "And judging by the teeth marks," he said, "I believe a certain cocker spaniel is to blame."

Riley ruffled Pepper's ears. "That's pair number

three," she said to the dog. "Anyway, thanks, Manuelo. But actually I wasn't looking for the flip-flop. I'm trying to decide what to put into a time capsule."

As Manuelo continued to videotape the room, Riley told him about the West Malibu High project. "Everyone on the committee gets to put something in. Got any ideas for me?"

"Hmm . . ." Manuelo shuffled through the photos on the bed. "Ah! This is a possibility."

"Really?" Riley asked, peering over his shoulder at the picture of some of her friends. "I took that at the Spring Fling last month. Why that one?"

Manuelo pointed to her friend Rebecca's high-heeled sneakers. "Because future generations need to know what styles should never be repeated!" he said, making a face.

Riley laughed.

"Or, how about a printout of all your e-mail correspondence?" Manuelo suggested.

Riley gave him a look. He had to be kidding.

"On the other hand," Manuelo went on, his eyes twinkling, "being longer than *War and Peace*, that would probably go unread."

Riley rolled her eyes again. "Very funny."

"Sorry, Riley, I couldn't resist." Manuelo patted her on the shoulder. "I promise you, I will give your project some serious thought."

Riley knew he would. Manuelo was also the family's full-time friend/problem-solver. But she didn't have a lot of time to wait right now. She had to decide on her capsule contribution fast. The committee wanted to know by Monday what everybody was putting in.

Manuelo continued panning the room with the camera. "This little gadget is fabulous!" he declared.

"Uh-huh," Riley murmured, staring at all the stuff on her bed. Last summer's tankini? The lightning-bolt nail appliqués? Nah. They only said something about *her*. She picked up the school calendar and started flipping through it. Each page had a collage of candid photos of West Malibu High students. That might work, she thought. But it's still not . . . exciting.

"It's so easy to use," Manuelo went on, raving about the new camera. "Even for a technically challenged person such as myself. Years from now we will still have a true record of the Carlson household. Including the stupendous mess in this room—which, *hopefully*, will not still be here one hundred years from now!"

"Huh? Wait. A *true record*!" Riley tossed the calendar back onto the bed and pointed at the camera. "That's it, Manuelo! That's what I'll put into the time capsule!"

Manuelo clutched the camera to his heart. "Riley, your mother purchased this only a week ago. And, forgive me for being crass, but it cost a bundle!"

"I didn't mean the camera itself," Riley explained.

"But I can use it to videotape kids from my class. That way I'll get *everything* about us—what we wear, how we talk, what we like and don't like. I can do interviews and film kids skateboarding or shopping or whatever, and it'll all be on tape—a true record, like you said!"

"It's an excellent idea!" Manuelo agreed. "Truly inspired . . . by yours truly!"

"Yeah! I owe you one, Manuelo!" Riley was psyched. Her video was going to be the hit of the project. "And just for giving me that brilliant idea, I'm going to clean up this mess—*and* reorganize my shoe trees!"

Manuelo sighed happily. "*Caramba*! And it isn't even my birthday!"

chapter two

"Seventy-two, seventy-four, seventy-six." Chloe spun her invitation list around on the table so the others could read it. "Seventy-six so far! This party is going to be huge! Did we leave anybody out?"

While Tara and Quinn studied the guest list, Chloe took a sip of her frothy mocha steamer and glanced around the Newsstand. It was late Saturday morning, and the popular Internet café and coffee bar was starting to fill up.

"Did we put Codi Brooks on there?" Chloe asked, spotting a girl from her French class buying a latte. "And her twin sister, Lindsey?"

Quinn ran a finger down the list and shook her head. Chloe handed her a pen, and she wrote both Codi's and Lindsey's names on the list. "Anybody else?"

Ten minutes and six names later, Chloe checked the

list again. "I wrote down everybody I can think of."

"Okay," Tara said, sipping her iced coffee. "So, what's next?"

"Invitations," Chloe said. "I'll do one on my computer. Something like *Ready for the Beach Blast of the Century*? I'll put all our names on it. And I'll e-mail it to everybody. Just remember to forward me your address books. What else?"

"Food, music, decorations," Quinn said, ticking the items off on her fingers.

"Food," Chloe echoed. "Hamburgers, hot dogs, and munchies?"

"Or a five-foot sourdough sub," Tara suggested. "Make that a ten-foot, if everybody comes."

"Shish kebobs would be fun, too," Chloe said. "Chicken, shrimp, veggies, fruit . . ."

"Let's do both," Quinn said. "Oh, wait. Do we have enough money for all that?"

Chloe was mentally adding up her supply of cash, which was not exactly huge, when Riley came into the café, camcorder in hand.

"I forgot to tell you!" Chloe said. "Riley came up with something superspecial to put into the time capsule."

As her sister made her way toward their table, Chloe explained the idea for the video. "And she wants to interview *us*," she finished.

"Cool!" Tara said. "Just think, we're going to be part

of history!" She pulled a small mirror from her bag and fixed her hair.

Chloe quickly checked her lip gloss, flipped her hair over her shoulders, and sat up very straight. If she was going to be part of history, she wanted to look good.

"Hi, Riley," Quinn said, smoothing on some Berry-Berry lip gloss. "We're ready for our big interview."

"Great!" Riley aimed the camera at Chloe and pushed the RECORD button. "Okay, Chloe, tell me your thoughts about West Malibu High."

"Well, it's . . . a very good school," Chloe said, smiling brightly. "It has great teachers and . . ."

"Hold it." Riley stopped taping. "Chloe, you sound like a commercial. And you're as stiff as a robot!"

Chloe laughed. "Sorry. I guess I was imagining people watching it."

"Nobody's going to see it for at least a hundred years," Riley reminded her. "Come on, relax. Be totally honest. Say whatever you want!"

Whatever I want? This could be fun, Chloe thought. "Okay, shoot," she said.

Riley pushed the RECORD button.

"Hi, my name is Chloe Carlson," Chloe said, smiling at the camera. "I'm a freshman at West Malibu High, and I love it. For one thing, it's really clean, and we owe that to Vice Principal Connor, also known as our germ warden."

Chloe hopped up. She puffed out her cheeks and tried to make her stomach stick out like V.P. Connor's.

"Did you wash your hands?" she whined in Mr. Connor's squeaky nasal voice. "Keep the cafeteria a germ-free zone! Wash your hands! Anyone not washing before entering will face detention!"

Riley and the others burst out laughing. "That's him exactly!" Riley exclaimed. "I've never seen you do imitations before, Chloe! You're great at it! Can you do anybody else?"

"Sure!" Chloe was starting to get into it. "Vice Principal Connor isn't the only obsessive person at school," she said into the camera. "You should see Ms. Spoke, my sewing teacher. Oh, right, you'll never see her. That's okay. I can imitate *her*, too."

Chloe pressed her lips together and frowned deeply, the way Ms. Spoke did when she was stressing. "This stitch is crooked!" she muttered. "I can't get it right! I don't know what to do. It must be the sewing machine!" She slammed her fists on the table. "The stupid, stupid machine!"

"Keep going," Riley urged. "It's great!"

"Okay, let's see. Oh! I can't leave out Mr. MacManus!" Chloe cried. "He's my math teacher, and he's a total genius in the subject. But you have to feel sorry for anybody he dates. I mean, I can just picture him having a romantic dinner."

Chloe sat down and spoke to an imaginary date. "You see, Mary, it's simple," she droned in a deep monotone. "If X equals Y minus four hundred to the third power, then all you have to do is . . . Mary, did you hear me? Mary, wake up!"

Riley laughed again. Tara and Quinn applauded.

Chloe was a little surprised at herself. She never acted this silly. Well, almost never. But it was fun! Besides, nobody alive now was going to see it.

Riley turned the camera on Quinn. "Okay, your turn. Let's see, tell me what you do for fun. Like, what are you doing tonight?"

"Um, tonight?" Quinn hesitated for a second. "Well, I know what I'm *not* doing tonight," she said. "I'm *not* going to Ellie Farber's party. Don't get me wrong—I like Ellie a lot. But her parties are way boring."

"Tell the viewers at home why," Riley urged.

"Well," Quinn began. "For starters, she plays dull music and silly party games, like charades. I mean, charades can be fun, I guess. But Ellie always picks the weirdest categories. Like last time it was vegetables. Just try acting out 'asparagus'!"

"Oh, right! And the party before that, it was bugs," Chloe joined in. She grabbed some invisible reins and bounced up and down in her chair. Then she flapped her arms in the air. "That was a horsefly, in case you're wondering."

Riley laughed. "Got it!" she said. "And I think our home audience gets the picture about Ellie's parties!" she added. Then she turned the camera on Tara. "What about you, Tara? Got any major plans for tonight?"

"Checking out boys." Tara grinned.

"Tara has boys on the brain," Quinn added. "As for me, I have caramel lattes on the brain. I'm going up for a refill. Can I hook anyone up?"

"I'm good," Chloe said.

"Me, too," Tara added. "I still have iced coffee left."

"Be right back then," Quinn told them, heading for the coffee bar.

"I really *do* have boys on the brain these days," Tara admitted cheerfully. "But just one in particular. I'm crushing on Brian O'Keefe big time!"

"Oh, I know who he is," Riley said. "Black hair, right?"

Tara nodded enthusiastically. "Right! Dark brown eyes and *incredibly* long eyelashes!"

Chloe laughed. "Down, girl."

"But he's *so* cute!" Tara exclaimed. "He smiled at me yesterday in math, and I got the definite feeling he's interested! It was, like, we made this connection, you know? I really, really hope he comes to our party."

"I could put a special P.S. on his invitation," Chloe teased. "*Please come—Tara's totally in* luuuve *with you*!"

"Don't you dare!" Tara warned, suddenly serious.

"Just kidding," Chloe promised.

[Chloe: Wow! Tara's way more interested in Brian than I thought!]

Tara glanced at Riley. "Oh, no! I forgot you're actually taping this! Wait! Omigosh! What if Brian sees it?"

"Don't worry," Riley told her. "Nobody is going to see it. Well, people *are* going to see it, but not for another hundred years."

"And I don't think Brian's hair will still be black by then," Chloe joked. "Or that he'll be such a good dancer!"

"Still . . . can't you rewind it, and we'll do it again?" Tara pleaded. "I'll try to act better."

"No way! It's great this way . . . much more natural," Riley said. "But I'm stopping now anyway," she added, lifting her finger from the RECORD button. "I want to catch Jenna and Joelle. They just came in. See you guys later. And thanks—you were perfect!"

Riley took off across the café, just as Quinn returned with her latte in a to-go cup. Chloe turned to her friends. "I'd better go home and do that invitation, or we'll wind up having the greatest party nobody ever came to."

"I've got to go, too," Tara said, standing up and slinging her bag over one shoulder. "I promised my mom I'd clean my room."

"I've got stuff to do, too," Quinn said.

"We still need to decide on food and decorations," Chloe reminded them, pushing back her chair. "Let's talk later or . . . I know! *Zombie Party* opens today at the Cineplex. I'm dying to see it. Why don't we all go tonight? Then we can figure out the party stuff after."

"Great!" Tara agreed. "Let's meet at the Cineplex at six-thirty."

"Sounds good to me," Chloe said. "Quinn?" she asked as Tara hurried off. "You'll be there, right?"

"Actually, I don't think I can make it," Quinn said, standing up.

"Oh, no. Why not?" Chloe asked.

Quinn muttered something as she rummaged through her canvas tote.

"Huh?" Chloe said.

"I might have to . . ." Quinn's voice descended to a murmur again while she kept searching through her bag. Finally she straightened up. Her face was flushed. "I might have to help clean out the garage."

"Ugh," Chloe said. She thought a second. "Wait a minute—what garage? Your house doesn't have a garage."

"I know that!" Quinn laughed awkwardly. "I said *garbage*. Listen, I'll try to make it, but if I'm not at the Cineplex by six-thirty, don't wait for me. Gotta go now. Talk to you later. Bye!" She hurried off.

[Chloe: Maybe you're wondering why it would take six and a half hours for Quinn to help take

out the garbage. Well, so am I. The Reyes keep their house so clean, it makes the rest of us normally sloppy people feel like incredible slobs. So why can't Quinn go to the movie? Something funny is going on!]

chapter three

"I guess I should warn you," Riley told her boyfriend, Charlie Slater, as they walked to Ellie Farber's house that night. "This party we're headed to is not exactly going to rock."

"*Now* you tell me?" Charlie joked, his brown eyes sparkling. "Okay, let me have it."

"Well . . . Ellie likes pretty lame music," Riley admitted.

"Aak!" Charlie pretended to choke. He was a serious punk music fan.

"And she's into party games," Riley went on. "How are you at charades?"

"Uh-oh. Is it too late to back out?"

"Way too late. Besides, I went to Alternative Universe with you last week," Riley reminded him. Alternative Universe was *the* store for fans of out-of-the-mainstream music, including punk. "And I stayed with

you the whole time you poked through every last CD and compared notes with everyone there."

"True. I guess I owe you one." Charlie slung an arm around her shoulders.

Riley snuggled close and grinned. When she first met Charlie, she could hardly stand him. She thought he was a reverse snob, turning up his nose at anything that wasn't alternative. And he thought she was a surfer girl with nothing but air between her ears. They argued all the time—about music, books, movies, parties, and people.

[Riley: And we still argue! But the cool thing is, we like—well, more than like—each other. I guess we've gone from being a case of "opposites repel" to "opposites attract."]

"Well, the worst thing about this party is that it will probably be boring," Riley promised. "But everyplace else is totally dead. I can't believe how empty the Newsstand was. And nobody's out on the boardwalk because the weather's so yucky. Who says it never rains in Malibu?"

"The tourist bureau?" Charlie quipped. "Anyway," he added, "at least you'll be able to get more footage for your time capsule video."

"I hope so." Riley patted the pocket of her blue hoodie, where she'd tucked the little camcorder to keep

it dry. "Of course, I've already got some outstanding stuff, like you tripping off your skateboard," she teased.

Charlie groaned. "You're going to erase that, right?"

"No way." Riley grinned at him. "It's a true record of Charlie Slater, ace skater!"

As they turned up Ellie's walk, Riley glanced at the house. "Hey, the place looks like it's hopping!" she said, pointing to the silhouettes moving back and forth in the brightly lit windows. "Sounds like it, too," she added, hearing the sounds of drums and steel guitar.

"Surprise, surprise, it's Cold Fusion," Charlie remarked. "Not as good as Mental Ray, but I'll take it."

Mental Ray must be another group I've never heard of, Riley thought as they hurried up the front steps of the pale blue stucco house. She made a note of the group's name for a possible future CD gift for Charlie.

A hand-lettered sign on Ellie's front door read COME ON IN! so they did. Inside the entrance Riley pushed back her hood and glanced around in surprise. The place was packed! Her best friend, Sierra, waved from a corner of the living room, where she was talking with Saul and Marta. The three of them were in The Wave, a band they'd formed with some other kids.

Joelle and Jenna were scarfing pizza by the fireplace. Larry, Riley's next-door neighbor, was doing his Elvis impression for a bunch of giggling girls. Riley had only seen that bit about a zillion times.

"Riley, hi!" Ellie made her way through the crowd, a flustered expression on her small round face. "This isn't exactly how I thought it would be, but welcome to the party! I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Thanks," Riley said, introducing Charlie. "What do you mean, it's not how you thought it would be?"

"So many people showed up, and they just kind of took over!" Ellie said. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad everybody came. Except I had some really fun games I wanted us to play, and it's just too wild."

"Bummer," Charlie deadpanned.

Riley nudged him with an elbow.

"Oh, well, I guess it's okay. At least everybody's having fun," Ellie chirped. "Okay, I'm going to see if I can change the CD."

"Oh, no, you don't," a guy said, blocking Ellie's way. He looked like her, with the same round face and pale blue eyes. "If I can't have Dethmode, you can't have that bubble-gum pop stuff."

Riley could almost see Charlie's ears perk up. "You like Dethmode?" he asked the guy.

"Major fan. Major," the guy said.

Ellie rolled her eyes. "This is my brother, Strobe. Unfortunately, he's totally into punk." Then she mumbled something about having to order more pizza and hurried away.

Riley slipped the video camera out of her pocket

and turned to Charlie. He was already in a deep discussion with Strobe about the merits of Dethmode's latest CD. "I'm going to shoot some video," she said.

"Huh? Oh, right. Great," Charlie said. He gave her a quick kiss, then turned back to Strobe.

Luck is on my side, Riley decided. I can get some video and not worry that Charlie's bored. Whoever thought Ellie would have a punk-fan brother named Strobe?

Riley opened the little screen on the side of the camera, pushed the RECORD button, and began working her way through the crowd. When she explained what she was doing and promised that no one would see the tape, everyone got caught up in performing. Josh stuck straws up his nose, Drake and Caren pelted each other with pizza crusts, and a lot of kids made goofy faces.

This is like being in grade school again, Riley thought. But who cared? It was fun.

Suddenly Larry's face loomed up in the video screen. "Hi, Riley! What's up with the camera?"

"Hi, Larry." Riley stopped taping and explained the time capsule video. "I definitely want you on it, okay?"

"Absolutely. Wait—tooth check!" Larry ran his tongue over his teeth and tried to smooth his spiky brown hair. "Okay. Ready for my closeup!"

"This isn't an audition, Larry," Riley reminded him.

"Yeah, but don't you want me to look my best?" He raised and lowered his eyebrows comically.

[Riley: Larry Slotnick is one of the biggest goofballs I know. He's also one of my closest friends! When I first moved to Malibu, Larry had a major crush on me and used to ask me out all the time. Thank goodness he got over it—we're much better off as friends. Of course, a day doesn't go by where he doesn't ask me out . . . or for my hand in marriage! Sure, it gets old after a while, but I can't even imagine what a day would be like without a marriage proposal from Larry Slotnick!]

"I just want you to look like yourself," Riley explained. "Okay, minus any stringy cheese stuck in your teeth. I want you to *be* yourself. I'm going for real life here, so people in the future know what we were like."

"Real life—got it." Larry paused. "You're gonna bury this, right?"

"I promise you, Larry, I am the only one in this entire city, state, or country who will see it," Riley declared.

"You left out the world," Larry pointed out.

"Or world," Riley added. "In our lifetime, that is."

"In that case . . ." Larry smiled. "Shoot."

Riley pushed the RECORD button.

Larry's smile turned into a big grin. "Larry Slotnick here," he announced. "Charming, good-looking, as you can see. Also a man of many talents. And many secrets."

"Oh? Do tell!" Riley said.

"Okay, my life is in your hands, Riley." Larry gulped in several deep breaths of air, swallowing in between each one.

Riley cringed. "You look like you're about to hurl."

Holding up a finger, Larry gulped and swallowed one last time. He then *burped* out the words to the school song, "Our Hearts Are True to West Malibu."

Riley's eyes widened, but she didn't take them off the camera screen. "Larry! You're the West Malibu Belcher!" she cried.

"Shh!" Larry glanced around. "Do you want me to suffer detention for the rest of my natural life?"

"Sorry." Riley giggled. Ten times over the past three weeks someone had managed to commandeer the principal's P.A. system and burp the school song into the classrooms instead of reading announcements. Almost everyone, including Riley, thought it was hilarious, but it was driving Vice Principal Connor up the wall. He was on the warpath, vowing to track down the belcher and chain him in the detention room forever.

"Your secret is safe with me," Riley whispered.

"I'm counting on it. Now, how about I do my Elvis impression?" Larry asked, trying to smooth his hair again. "It's a real winner. I'm thinking of entering the talent contest."

"What talent contest?" Sierra asked, sticking her head around Larry's right shoulder. "Hi, Riley. I've been

trying to get across the room to see you, but the place is so crowded. What talent contest, Larry?" she asked again.

"I don't know yet, but there's gotta be one somewhere. Now please, Sierra." Larry playfully pushed her out of range of the camera. "Riley and I are doing serious work here."

"Right. I was seriously about to tell Larry that I've already seen his Elvis impression and that thanks, but no thanks!"

"Oh, okay. But one more thing." Larry dropped to one knee and held his arms wide. "Riley, will you go out with me, puh-leeze?"

Riley rolled her eyes.

"Don't answer right away. Think about it!" Larry added. Jumping to his feet, he headed for the pizza table.

"For everyone in the future," Riley intoned into the camera's microphone, "that was Larry Slotnick, live."

"And unplugged." Sierra laughed.

"I'm getting so much crazy stuff on this video!" Riley told her. "Once I tell people nobody will see it for, like, forever, they go totally nuts. You should have seen Chloe! And you won't believe what Larry just told me."

"What?"

"He—" Riley caught herself just in time. "I can't. I promised." Not that she didn't trust Sierra, but a guy with reddish-brown hair was standing close enough to over-

hear. Riley turned the camera on her friend. "Okay, Sierra, you're on now. Tell future generations about yourself."

Sierra smiled at the camera. "Well, my real name is Sarah, and I *used* to lead a double life. See, I love my parents to pieces, but they're kind of old-fashioned about things like clothes and music. So when I started playing bass guitar in The Wave, I changed my name to Sierra and kept the whole thing a secret from Mom and Dad."

"But everybody else knew, right?" Riley prompted.

Sierra nodded. "And thanks to a whole lot of convincing from my best friend behind the camera, Mom and Dad know now, too," she told her future audience. "And guess what? They weren't mad. They were actually proud that I'd helped start a band and that we're really good! Which we *so* are."

[Riley: Sierra's band is awesome! Even Charlie agrees The Wave rocks—and he's strictly a punk fan. Anyway, I wish Sierra would come clean with her parents about the whole changing clothes thing, too. They were so cool about her being in a band, I think they'll be cool about that, too.]

"So they know about the band, but what about the clothes?" Riley teased, already knowing the answer.

Sierra laughed and spun around like a model. She was wearing a hip-slung denim skirt and a crimson tank

top decorated with tiny mirrored disks. Her flaming red hair tumbled over her shoulders and sparkled lightly with glitter.

"Okay, okay, I haven't told my parents about my clothes," Sierra confessed to the camera. "I don't want to hit them with too much too fast. So, yes," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, "I still bring cool clothes to wherever I'm going and change into them once I get there. My boring, all-purpose long skirt and tee *with* sleeves are in Ellie Farber's bathroom as we speak."

"It's just a matter of time before your mom and dad find out that you're a quick-change artist," Riley warned. "It'll be better if you're the one who tells them."

"And I will." Sierra did a riff on an air guitar and grinned at the camera. "Just not yet."

After taping Sierra, Riley did another pan of the room, getting lots of silly faces whenever someone noticed the camera. Charlie, still hunkered down with Strobe over a stack of CDs, glanced up long enough to give her a smile that sent happy shivers down her spine.

"Hey, Riley, do you, um, want to dance?" a guy suddenly asked into the camera.

Riley stopped taping and looked at him. It was the boy with the reddish-brown hair. He wore a blue T-shirt and a shy smile on his roundish face. Riley had seen him at school a lot. What was his name? She'd heard some

his friends calling to him in the hall just the other day. m! That was it.

She smiled and shook her head. "Thanks, Tom, but n't."

"Oh." Tom's face fell. He looked so disappointed t Riley instantly felt bad.

She held up the camera. "I've got to do some tap- ng," she explained.

"Oh, yeah!" His blue eyes lit up. "I heard about your time capsule video. Great idea! Looks like you're getting kids to do some pretty wild stuff on tape."

"I know," Riley said. "I'm really excited about it."

"Hey, can I see it sometime?" he asked. "There's a screening room at school, and we can—"

"No way!" Riley exclaimed.

"Oh," Tom said, staring at his feet.

"I didn't mean it that way," Riley said. "It's just that I promised my friends that no one will see all that embarrassing stuff for many, many years. They'd be really upset with me if it got out." She lifted up the camera. "Hey, do you want to be on it?"

Tom blushed. "Really?"

"Sure!" Riley smiled and aimed the camera at him. "Go ahead."

Tom's face grew even redder. "Um, hi. I'm Tom Melnick," he said. "I'm, uh . . ."

Riley waited for him to finish, but Tom just stood there.

[Riley: Wow, this guy is supershy! He seems sweet enough, but, like, how long can I stand here filming *nothing*?]

She decided to help him along. "So what's your favorite thing in the world?" she asked. "Music? Surfing?"

"Movies," Tom said, relaxing a little. "I'm really into film. I'm, uh, president of the student film society."

"Cool!" Riley declared.

Tom nodded eagerly. "It's really fun," he said. "We watch a different film every week and then talk about it. And some of us make our own films."

Riley noticed that Tom was more confident when he talked about the film club. But as soon as he stopped, he became his bashful self again.

She stopped taping. "Thanks, Tom. Listen, I'm going to try to catch some more people, okay?"

"Okay." Tom took a deep breath, then glanced over at a bunch of guys gathered around a bowl of chips. They all seemed to be staring at him. "Hey, it was really great talking to you. You sure you don't want to dance?"

"I'm sure," Riley told him.

"Are you really sure?" Tom asked, his voice cracking.

Riley laughed. "Really sure. I'll be seeing you at school."

"Yeah. Definitely." Blushing again, Tom walked away toward the guys at the chips bowl.

Turning, Riley spotted Charlie across the room. His

big brown eyes lit up as he waved her over to come dance. Another happy shiver raced up her spine.

[Riley: Okay, so I *do* want to dance. But I want to dance with Charlie! Maybe I should have told Tom that I have a boyfriend. I hope I let him down easy enough. Anyway, Charlie's waving me over. Gotta go!]

Riley placed her video camera on a side table and covered it with her blue hoodie. Then she hurried over to Charlie.

[Riley: I *love* this song!]

"Quinn's still not answering," Tara reported, slipping her cell phone into her bag.

Weird, Chloe thought as she and Tara hurried through a wind-blown mist toward the Farber house. "Well, she probably wouldn't want to go to Ellie's party with us anyway."

Chloe wasn't exactly thrilled to be going to Ellie's either. But every showing of *Zombie Party* was sold out before she and Tara even got to the Cineplex, and lines for the other movies were out the door. They didn't feel like going to the Newsstand or anyplace else. They could have rented a DVD and stayed at home, but they both wanted to be out.

"Whoa! *That* doesn't sound like charades," Tara said as they approached the front door.

"Maybe this isn't the right house," Chloe joked. She read the sign and opened the front door, and they stepped inside.

"Whoa," Tara repeated as they moved toward the Farbers' living room. "It looks like everybody who couldn't get into *Zombie Party* decided to come here!"

Unzipping her short red jacket, Chloe shook back her hair and glanced around. There was Riley, laughing with Charlie and another guy. Sierra and some of the kids in her band were gathered around the CD player. They looked as if they were guarding the boom box from Ellie, who kept trying to peer over their shoulders.

"Maybe this won't be so boring after all," Chloe said, waving to everybody she knew. She heard the front door open and glanced back down the hall. "Hey, Quinn's here!"

"Omigosh! I cannot believe it!" Tara gasped. "Look who she's with!"

"Who . . . oh!" Chloe suddenly noticed the very cute guy with dark hair standing next to Quinn. Chloe barely knew him, but she recognized him. It was Brian O'Keefe.

"No wonder she didn't show up at the Cineplex or answer her cell!" Tara muttered. "All this time she was on a date with Brian!"

"Maybe it's not a date," Chloe murmured softly. "Maybe they just got here at the same time."

[Chloe: Who am I kidding? The way he's taking her jacket and smiling at her? The way she's smiling back? I know a date when I see one. And now I know why Quinn acted so funny at the Newsstand! She wanted to keep her date a secret! Uh-oh, here they come!]

"Chloe! Tara!" Quinn said, sounding startled. "I thought you were going to see *Zombie Party*! I didn't know you were coming here."

"We didn't think you'd be here either," Tara said. "Um, Quinn, could I talk to you for a second?"

"Well . . ." Quinn glanced at Brian.

"It's cool," he told her, heading into the living room. "I smell pizza. I'll try to score us a couple of slices."

"Quinn, what are you *doing*?" Tara asked as soon as Brian was out of earshot.

"What? Oh, you mean here?" Quinn asked. "Brian wanted to come because he and Ellie are friends."

"That is *not* what I meant!" Tara cried.

Oh boy, Chloe thought. Tara is really steamed.

"You know I've been drooling over Brian O'Keefe for weeks!" Tara told Quinn. "How could you go out with him?"

"Tara, why don't . . ." Chloe started, wanting to calm her down.

"But, Tara, you've been drooling over lots of guys," Quinn said. "I didn't know that Brian was your number

one drool-ee. All you ever said about him was that he's really cute."

"I said way more than that," Tara declared. "Right, Chloe?"

[Chloe: Gulp!]

"Well, yeah, I guess you did," Chloe said to her friend. "But I don't think Quinn was even around when you told me all that stuff about crushing on Brian. Honestly? I didn't get exactly *how* interested you were before then either."

"I totally don't remember you saying you had a major crush on him!" Quinn added. "I sort of caught on when you started talking about him at the Newsstand this morning. But Brian had already asked me out by then. What was I supposed to do? Cancel the date?"

"Yes!" Tara said.

Quinn's face flushed. "Well, I didn't!"

[Chloe: Now Quinn is steamed! Don't you just hate it when friends fight? I should say something!]

"Um . . ." Chloe said.

[Chloe: Oh, brilliant!]

"Listen, Tara, could we talk about this later?" Quinn asked.

"There's nothing to talk about!" Tara declared. She marched down the hall and out the front door, slamming it behind her.

[Chloe: Oh, boy, this is *so* not good! I don't blame Tara for being upset, but she totally lost it! Don't get me wrong, it's not as if we've never argued before, but I have the feeling this rates an eight or a nine on the seriousness scale. And I'd better do something before things get even worse. We're throwing a party together in one week!]

chapter four

Sunday night, Chloe was getting ready for bed when she heard the computer play a clip from pop-star Halle Rose's hit song "Couple of Friends." She'd just reprogrammed her Buddy List to play the romantic pop tune every time someone IMed her.

[Chloe: Okay, I know it's sappy, but it makes me think of Lennon when I hear it, so until he comes back from that debate team competition . . . I'm keeping it!]

She sat down at her computer desk and tapped the mouse until her screen appeared. The IM was from Tara.

TARA-BARA: Chlo, u there?

CHLOE142: Hey! Yup, I'm here. Where've

u been all day? I tried calling, like, a zillion times!

TARA-BARA: Yeah, I know. I was incommunicado today . . . by choice. Went clothes shopping with mom. Didn't want 2 talk 2 anybody. Still really mad @ Quinn!!!!

CHLOE142: Anything I can do 2 help? u guys can't fight! u r my best friends!

TARA-BARA: I thought Quinn was MY best friend! But best friends don't steal their best friend's boyfriends!!!!!!!!!

Before Chloe could respond that Brian was never Tara's boyfriend, she heard "Couple of Friends" again. Another IM was coming in. Chloe clicked the cursor and found a message blinking from Quinn!

Fit4aQUINN: Chloe? Chloe? u online?

CHLOE142: Yeah, hey, Quinn.

Fit4aQUINN: u talk 2 Tara today?

CHLOE142: Just online. She was out all

day w/her mom. Clothes shopping, lunch . . .

Fit4aQUINN: Can u believe her last nite? She was totally out of line!!!

CHLOE142: Well, she was surprised 2 c u w/Brian.

Fit4aQUINN: But I TOLD her, I didn't know she LIKED HIM liked him!!!

Suddenly, the song clip sounded again.

TARA-BARA: Chloe??? Where'd u go? r u talking 2 Quinn??!! Chloe?

And again.

Fit4aQUINN: Right? Aren't I right? How was I supposed 2 know she liked him more than just a regular crush? Chloe? Chloe?

And still, again...

TARA-BARA: Chloe?

Fit4aQUINN: Chloe?

TARA-BARA: u still there?

Fit4aQUINN: hello?

[Chloe: Ugh! I think Lennon and I are going to need a new song. . . .]

Chloe tried to answer both her friends as best she could.

CHLOE142: Tar, c'mon. u can't stay mad at Quinn! She didn't realize how much u liked Brian.

She hit the ENTER key, then typed to Quinn.

CHLOE142: Quinn, Tara was just upset 2 see u w/Brian.

Again, Chloe hit ENTER. A second later, the flood gates opened and the IMs came pouring in! "Couple of Friends" played over and over, almost continuously. IM after IM, from Quinn and Tara, this one complaining about that one and that one complaining about this one. Chloe started to lose track of who was complaining about what! Quinn was a low-down, no-good betrayer,

according to Tara. According to Quinn, Tara was totally unfair and incredibly selfish. And someone thought somebody was just plain jealous, but Chloe couldn't figure out who was "somebody" and who was "someone."

Finally, she'd had enough. She leaned over the keyboard and typed furiously.

CHLOE142: Gotta go, Tara. Mom's calling me! We'll talk 2morrow!

Chloe logged off with Tara.

CHLOE142: Gotta go, Quinn. Mom's calling me! We'll talk 2morrow!

She then logged off with Quinn.

Chloe sat back in her chair and sighed. Maybe tomorrow, face to face, she'd have better luck getting her friends to listen to reason.

Chloe then thought about the party they were all throwing together in less than one week and she had a slight panic attack.

[Chloe: You don't think Tara and Quinn's fight will still be going on by then, do you? For sure they're going to make up tomorrow and be best buds again just in time for our party this weekend . . . right?]

chapter five

"Fifty-nine yeses and only three nos," Chloe reported to Quinn. It was Monday, and Chloe was giving Quinn an update on the party-of-the-century guest list while they headed to the cafeteria. "Can you believe we only have five days left? We still haven't bought any decorations either."

Quinn stopped walking. "Chloe, I'm sorry, but I've got to tell you something."

Chloe's stomach took a major dive. In her experience, whenever people said they *had* to tell her something—and they were *sorry*—the news wasn't going to be good.

"It's about our party," Quinn said. "If Tara's still 'in,' then count me out."

I was right, Chloe thought. Except it's worse than not good. It's terrible!

"Quinn, how can you say that?" she asked. "This is *the* party we're talking about! Yours, mine, and Tara's!"

"I know, and I'm sorry," Quinn said again. "But, Chloe, I am so steamed! I mean, you know how I feel about Tara right now!"

Chloe nodded unhappily.

"She didn't even call me to apologize or anything!" Quinn went on. "And you heard how rude she was on Saturday night! Sorry, Chloe, but I don't want to have anything to do with Tara Jordan at the moment. And that means throwing a party that she's throwing, too!"

And I actually hoped things would have cooled down by today, Chloe thought. Now Quinn was backing out of helping with the party?

"But I can't do the party without you!" Chloe said. "All those people coming, plus food and decorations and music—it's too much!"

"But you don't really need *me*. You have *Tara*," Quinn reminded Chloe. "And speaking of you-know-who, there she is. Talk to you later, Chloe!" Quinn sped down the hallway.

[Chloe: Okay, don't panic. This is serious, but I'll figure out some way to get Quinn and Tara to make up.]

"Was that Quinn?" Tara asked, joining Chloe outside the cafeteria doors.

Chloe decided to try for a casual, everything's-cool attitude. "Yes, we were talking about the party. I'm getting really stoked! Fifty-nine people are coming so far. And I was thinking we should go to the mall tonight. Party HQ has tons of great decorations."

Tara frowned. "Is Quinn going?"

"Well . . ."

"Because if she is, I'm not," Tara declared. "And I'm sorry, Chloe, but if Quinn's going to help throw the party, then I won't."

[Chloe: Time to ditch the casual approach and beg!]

"Tara, you can't do that!" Chloe cried. "Quinn just told me that if *you* help throw the party, then *she* won't!"

"Fine," Tara said coolly. "Let her help."

"But I want you, too!" Chloe said.

Tara shook her head. "Look, maybe we should just cancel the whole thing," she added.

"It's too late!" Chloe cried. "I already told you, almost sixty people have RSVP'd yes! We've got to buy decorations and food and everything! I can't do it all by myself!"

"You won't have to. You have Quinn." Hitching her book bag up on her shoulders, Tara strode into the cafeteria.

[Chloe: Now why did that whole conversation sound familiar? Oh, right. Because I had the exact same one with Quinn, like, thirty seconds ago!]

Things were actually getting worse! Chloe just had to get Quinn and Tara to make up. The party didn't matter as much as their friendship mattered.

Somehow Chloe had to get the Three Musketeers back together again.

After changing into a pair of old running shorts and a stretched-out yellow T-shirt, Riley took Pepper for a quick walk after school. Then they both settled down in the bedroom, Riley at the computer, Pepper underneath, with her muzzle resting on one of Riley's bare feet.

Surfing the Web, Riley spotted a site called *e-Poetry Slam*. That could be fun. She loved writing poetry. She was just about to click on the site when the computer made its IM alert sound. A box popped onto the screen.

TM727: Hi, Riley. r u there?

TM? Riley didn't recognize the screen name.

RILEY241: I'm here. Who is this?

TM727: Oh, sorry. Tom Melnick. From

Ellie's party, remember? I asked u 2 dance.

Riley remembered. Tom with the blushing face and shy smile.

RILEY241: Oh, sure. Hi, Tom. Wuzzup?

TM727: Well, it's . . . kind of funny. I sort of have your tape.

RILEY241: My tape?

TM727: Your time capsule tape. I have it.

RILEY241: LOL!

TM727: No. Wait a sec. I'll show u.

Tom logged off, and in a couple of seconds Riley's computer announced that she had mail. It was from Tom. She clicked the envelope icon and read the message.

Dear Riley, Don't worry. I'll give it back. It's really good. And your sister does a wicked VP Connor!

The e-mail had an audiovisual attachment. Cautiously Riley opened it.

And there was Chloe at the Newsstand, sticking her stomach out. "Did you wash your hands?" she squeaked in her V.P. Connor voice. "Keep the cafeteria a germ-free zone! Wash your hands! Anyone not washing before entering . . ."

Jumping out of her chair, Riley hurried across her room and grabbed the camcorder off the dresser. She hadn't touched it since she came home from Ellie's party. She quickly checked to see if the purple and white mini digital tape was inside.

It wasn't.

[Riley: Okay, this is just a joke, right? Don't stress. He's going to give the tape back, right?]

The computer made its IM sound again. Dumping the camera onto her bed, she hurried back to the desk.

TM727: Riley?

RILEY241: What's going on? Can I have my tape back please?

TM727: Sure. But I have 2 go now. Could u have lunch with me @ school tomorrow? Meet me in cafeteria. I'll xplain

everything. And don't worry. Your tape is safe!

It had better be safe! Riley thought as Tom signed off. That tape was full of stuff she'd promised her friends no one would see for a hundred years! If anyone did see it, Chloe would die of humiliation, not to mention get in trouble for making fun of Vice Principal Conner. And Charlie wasn't going to be too thrilled about everyone seeing him fall off his skateboard either. And Larry? By the time Larry got out of detention for being the West Malibu Belcher, he'd be walking with a cane!

chapter six

"This way, Mom." Chloe pointed to the escalators as she and her mother entered the mall that night. "Party HQ is upstairs."

"Yes, but, Chloe, look at those gorgeous candles!" Macy Carlson, slender and stylish in tan linen pants and a silk jacket, hurried over to the display window at Flickers. "Would they fit in with your party motif?"

Do we even have a motif? Chloe wondered, eyeing the fat round candles perched on six-foot-tall pedestals of black wrought iron. Oh, right—the beach.

"Let's go in and price them. Oh, wait . . . there's my cell," Macy said. She slipped a sleek little phone out of her leather bag and flipped it open. "Macy Carlson. Yes, Johanna. What? Let me check." Using her free hand, she whipped out her Palm Pilot.

[Chloe: You've heard of multitasking, right? I'm

almost positive Mom invented it. And in case you're wondering why I'm shopping for party stuff with my mother—not that I mind—it's because I couldn't get Tara *or* Quinn to come with me. Tara said she had "other plans." Quinn said she was waiting until Tara was officially out of the party picture!]

"Sorry, sweetie, that was one of my suppliers," Macy said, snapping her phone shut. "Now. What about the candles?"

Chloe checked them out again and decided they were way too serious-looking. "I don't think so, Mom," she said. "The motif is *beach*, not *Goth*."

"Hmm. The pedestals *are* a little heavy," Macy conceded. "But you definitely want some special lighting, something to help pull it all together. Oh, speaking of that, I have to call Veronica and make sure she got that shipment of Bali Blues out." She reopened her cell and punched a speed-dial number.

Speaking of pulling things together, Chloe thought, what am I going to do about Tara and Quinn?

"Done!" Macy snapped the phone shut again and smiled at Chloe. "All right, let's talk ambience. Little twinkling lights? Or votives in beach pails would be cute. How about draping fishnet on the deck rails? And driftwood—you could hide the speakers behind pieces of driftwood!"

[Chloe: Yikes. Mom's incredible, and I admire her to pieces, but she's getting a teensy bit carried away with the details!]

"Let's go up to Party HQ." Chloe slipped an arm through her mother's and began steering her toward the escalators. "It has tons of stuff. You know their commercials—'*Party* HQ, *Your One-Stop Party Shop*!'" she sang out in a chirpy voice.

As they headed past the entrance to the Cineplex, Chloe glanced at the doors. The crowd from the seven o'clock showing of *Zombie Party* was pouring out, chattering and laughing and repeating lines to one another.

Then Chloe stopped walking. Tara was in the crowd. So was Brian O'Keefe. And they were *together*!

Chloe reached into her bag for her cell phone, then suddenly remembered she'd left it recharging at home. "Mom, may I borrow your phone? Please?" Chloe asked, keeping an eye on the slowly moving couple.

[Chloe: A couple? I can't believe this! I must be seeing things. There has to be some explanation!]

"Sure, honey, but I'm expecting some important calls," Macy said. "Make sure you take messages."

"Don't worry, I will." Chloe took the phone. "Thanks, Mom. I'll meet you upstairs, okay?"

Her mother nodded and headed for the escalators. Chloe quickly punched in Tara's cell number.

Tara, wearing black low-rise jeans and a plum-colored top, slipped her cell phone out of her bag. "Hello?" she answered.

"What are you doing with Brian?" Chloe demanded.

Tara glanced around, totally startled. "Um . . . hi!" she said. "Hang on a sec."

Chloe watched as Tara murmured something to Brian, then fast-walked into the ladies' room. She snapped her mother's phone closed and followed. Just as she reached the bathroom door, Macy's phone beeped. She flipped it open and answered. "Macy Carlson's."

"Macy?" a woman's voice asked, sounding a wee bit frantic.

"No, I'm sorry," Chloe said. Pushing into the ladies' room, she saw Tara waiting by the long row of sinks. "Macy's out for a few minutes. May I have her call you?"

"Please!" the woman wailed. "It's Ardith Marsden, and three of the bridesmaid dresses don't fit! It's not Macy's fault—I told everybody to skip dessert until the wedding—but . . ."

Tara gestured toward the door, indicating I *really have to leave*.

"I understand," Chloe said into the phone. "Ardith Marsden. Macy will call you back, I promise." She closed the phone.

"What's going on?" Tara asked.

"That's what I was wondering," Chloe told her. "I mean, how come you're here with Brian?"

Tara grinned. "He called and asked me out!"

Before Chloe could ask the obvious—like, what about Quinn?—her mother's phone beeped again.

[Chloe: Arrgh!]

"Macy Carlson's," Chloe answered. "Don't go yet!" she added as Tara started moving toward the door.

"What?" a man's deep voice asked. "Macy?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry, I was talking to someone else!" Chloe told him. She'd seen her mother juggle five conversations at once. She couldn't even manage two! "Macy isn't here right now. Would like her to call you back?"

"Yes. This is Max Dreyer," the man replied. "Tell her the fabric has arrived, and it's short. She'll know what I mean."

"The fabric's short," Chloe repeated. "I'll tell her. Bye." She closed the phone, hoping she wouldn't forget the man's name. "Where was I?" she asked Tara.

"Short fabric?" Tara prompted.

"No, not that." Chloe took a deep breath and tried to clear her head. "Brian. Brian asked you out?"

Tara grinned again. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Yeah, but what about Quinn?" Chloe asked. "I mean, I thought he was dating *her*."

"That's exactly what I said to him when he called,"

Tara replied, tucking a strand of straight brown hair behind one ear. "Because even though I'm mad at her, I would never go behind *her* back the way *she* went behind *mine*."

"So what did he say? Wait!" she added, groaning as the phone beeped yet again.

"He said Quinn just wasn't his type. Listen, Chloe, I've gotta go!" Tara declared, pulling open the door. "Talk to you later!"

Taking another deep breath, Chloe answered the phone. "Macy Carlson's."

This call was from Laura, a distributor. Orders were up for Macy's new line of fall jackets. When could she deliver more?

[Chloe: Time to give Mom back her fashion empire.]

Chloe hurried out of the ladies' room. She made a mental list of the messages. Laura—fall jackets up. Max—fabric in, short. Ardith—bridesmaids porked out.

Got it, Chloe told herself as she stepped onto the escalator. Now she could think about other things, like the party. And even more important, what to do about Tara and Quinn!

chapter seven

It was Tuesday, and Chloe was feeling slightly confused. She was sitting with Quinn in the cafeteria, reporting on the decorations—and definitely not mentioning the new twosome of Tara and Brian—when she noticed something.

[Chloe: Take a good look at Quinn. Does she look like a girl who knows she won't be asked out again in the near future? All the classic signs—messy hair, puffy eyes, deep sighs—are missing.]

Chloe swallowed a bite of her veggie wrap and was about to say something when Quinn sighed loudly.

[Chloe: Oh! Okay, there it is! She sighed. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe *now* she'll tell me how sad she is about Brian ending things with her.]

"Pizza's great today," Quinn mumbled happily. "I was starving!" She smiled at Chloe.

[Chloe: Huh?]

Maybe she's pretending, Chloe thought, sipping some orange juice. That smile *could* be hiding a broken heart. No, not broken, she decided. Not after only one date. Bruised, maybe. Whatever, Chloe decided not to bring up the situation until Quinn did. Or until Chloe couldn't stand it any longer.

"So the decorations are set," Chloe said. "But there's still tons of stuff to do. Figure out the food and music, buy paper plates and napkins, put the decorations up . . ."

Chloe paused and glanced around the cafeteria. It was packed with kids eating pizza and wraps and shouting across the tables at one another. And in only four days most of them would be showing up at her house!

"Listen, could you come over tonight?" she asked Quinn. "We can do a quick Internet search for some cool recipes and go through our CDs." And maybe I can talk you into making up with Tara, she thought to herself. Plus get some help with the party, which I desperately need.

"Well . . ." Quinn swallowed her last bite of pizza. "Will Tara be there?"

Hah, Chloe thought. With Brian in the picture? Not likely. "No," she replied.

"Okay," Quinn said. "Hey, there's Riley! Who's the guy she's with?"

Chloe looked across the cafeteria. Sure enough, there was her sister, sitting down at a table with . . . who was that? "Oh. Isn't his name Tom Melnick?" she asked.

Quinn nodded. "That's it. Head of the film club. Really smart but supershy around girls."

Chloe smiled. Tom was blushing like crazy whenever Riley looked at him. Somebody's crushing on my sister, she thought.

Quinn suddenly gasped. "I just remembered! I can't come over tonight! I'm going out with Brian! I can't believe I almost forgot!"

"Brian?" Chloe choked on her juice. According to Tara, Brian had decided Quinn wasn't his type. What was going on?

"Who else?" Quinn giggled. "Can you believe this is our second date in only four days? He's taking me to see *Zombie Party*. We were going to go last night, but he was busy."

Yeah, busy dating Tara! Who, Chloe suddenly realized, thinks *she's* the only one he's interested in!

[Chloe: Is Brian O'Keefe a sneak, or what? And Quinn and Tara don't have a clue! They're going to be crushed. How am I going to break it to them that the guy they're both nuts for is two-

timing them? Look at how happy Quinn is! If I tell her right now that Brian is also dating Tara, she's going to freak. Instead, I need to come up with a way to expose the lying creep without anyone's feelings getting hurt. Any ideas? Nope. Me, neither.]

Riley glanced around the cafeteria. Chloe and Quinn were watching her curiously. Like, why was she eating with Tom? What was going on?

[Riley: Actually, I'd like to know that, too.]

Riley turned back to Tom and smiled. "So you were going to explain everything?" she said.

Tom gulped down some apple juice. "Right. But first I have to ask you something. I, um, wanted to ask you out," he said. "On a date. Would you go? Please?"

Riley took a sip of her iced tea. What did that have to do with the tape? she wondered. But first things first. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's really nice of you to ask, but I can't. I mean, I have a boyfriend, and . . ."

"That's okay, you don't have to explain," Tom said quickly. He glanced down to the far end of the table. A group of guys were watching them and snickering. "Listen, about your tape."

"Right, what's up with that?" Riley asked.

Tom took a deep breath. "This is really embarrassing.

but here goes. See, my friends think I asked you out for Friday night," he said shyly.

Riley's eyes narrowed. "Yeah? So?"

Tom swallowed nervously. "Well, uh, they kind of . . . they sort of also think you said yes."

"Huh? Why do they think that?" she asked.

Tom stared at his lunch. "Because I told them you said yes," he said quietly. He quickly glanced up. "I didn't mean to," he added, "it just sort of popped out! Unfortunately, they didn't believe me so they dared me to prove it."

[Riley: And my tape? What's this got to do with my tape?!]

"There's more," Tom said meekly. "The worst part. When you left your camera on a table at Ellie's party, I took the tape. I figured you'd really want it back and you wouldn't mind going out with me to get it. I mean, I decided to ask you first, just in case, but I was afraid you'd say no."

[Riley: Hold on! Stop the presses! Is this guy for real?]

"So you took the tape to trick me into going out with you?" she asked, wanting to make sure she'd heard correctly.

Tom nodded, his round face turning even redder.

"Just one date—that's all!" he said. "We can do whatever you want! Go for dinner, to a movie, to the Newsstand, whatever! And then I'll give you back your tape."

Riley glanced at Tom's friends watching them from the end of the table. She suddenly felt kind of sorry for Tom. Sure, taking the tape was a creepy thing to do, but he looked so unhappy while his friends were obviously having a lot of laughs at his expense.

"One date?" she found herself asking. "And you'll give me back my tape?"

Tom's eyes lit up. "Yes! Absolutely!"

"Well, I suppose I could," she said slowly. "But it's not really a *date* date because I have a boyfriend. Can we call it something else?"

"Oh, sure!" Tom replied.

"Maybe just in front of your friends you can call it a date," she added. "But as far as we're concerned, we're just having dinner together . . . as friends."

"Sure! Whatever you say, Riley!" Tom said. "And thanks so much for agreeing to go on a da—er, I mean, for agreeing to have 'dinner together as friends' with me. How about, um, Friday night?"

[Riley: I know. You think this is completely ridiculous. But I really, really want that tape back! And he's really, really desperate to get off the hook with his friends. It's only one time anyway. Charlie will understand . . . don't you think? Once

I get the tape back, I'll explain everything to Charlie. We'll go for a nice long walk and I'll tell him the whole story. Yeah, he'll understand. Well, at least I *hope* he'll understand!]

"Friday night," Riley agreed.

chapter eight

"Seven, eight, nine," Chloe counted under her breath. It was Wednesday after school, and she was checking her computer for more party RSVPs. She scrolled down the list of e-mails. "Ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen."

Fourteen today, plus five yesterday, added to the rest, made seventy-seven. Or was it seventy-eight? Oh, what difference did it make? The important question was, how was she going to get everything together by Saturday?

Chloe snatched up her to-do list. Hardly anything was crossed off yet! She still had to buy paper plates, cups, and napkins, citronella candles, borrow an extra grill and somehow get it to the house, figure out the food, put up the decorations—the bottom line was, she needed help!

If only she could get Tara and Quinn to be friends

again, then she'd have help! And have fun, the way they used to, Chloe thought. She really missed her friends.

The computer made its IM sound. Chloe hurried to check it. Great, it was Lennon!

LENNON256: Hey, Chloe. u there?

CHLOE142: Hi! Miss u! Hows the debate team doing?

LENNON256: Made it thru the 2nd round! Final round in a couple of days. Miss u 2. Wuzzup?

CHLOE142: Big party at my house Sat nite! You're invited. :) Tara and Quinn r supposed 2 b throwing it with me, but they're not speaking 2 each other!

Chloe gave Lennon a quick rundown of the Tara/Quinn/Brian situation.

LENNON256: Bad news. Did u talk 2 them?

CHLOE142: Tried. They won't listen. I have 2 figure out some way 2 get them back 2gether!

LENNON256: You will. Hey, Chloe, more bad

news: I gotta run. The team is calling!

CHLOE142: I understand. Can't wait 2 see u!

LENNON256: Ditto. Good luck w/ T & Q.

Chloe sighed, wishing she could just keep on talking with Lennon and forget about everything else! Unfortunately, that wasn't an option.

Chloe checked the to-do list again. Find recipes

Forget that, she thought, crossing it off with a pencil. With the amount of money she had left, all she could afford was munchies.

What else? Set up speakers outside

Hmmm. Maybe Larry can help with that. More CDs

I'll ask Riley if I can raid her collection. Rain?

[Chloe: Ugh. It couldn't possibly rain two weekends in a row, could it? No. But what if it does?]

"*Aarghhh*!" she shrieked loudly.

[Chloe: I know, that didn't solve a thing. But it felt good. As a stress-buster, shrieking is highly underrated.]

"Chloe, was that you?" Riley called from the kitchen. "Was that a scared scream or an I'm-freaking-out scream?"

"Freaking out!" Chloe shouted back.

"I thought so. Want me to break out the ice cream?"

"Definitely!" Chloe grabbed her list and hurried out of the room.

[Chloe: As a stress-buster, ice cream ties with screaming. Better than both is a sister to talk to.]

When Chloe got to the kitchen, Riley was putting two pints of mint chocolate chip on the table. "Okay, what's the matter?" she asked, handing Chloe a spoon.

"*Everything*!" Chloe groaned and flopped into a chair. "First of all, this party is going to be a disaster if I don't get some help! But Quinn won't do anything if Tara's involved, and Tara won't be around Quinn, and I'm stuck—"

"Wait. Back up," Riley said, sitting down. "What's going on with Tara and Quinn?"

"You mean I didn't tell you? I should have put it on my to-do list!"

Between spoonfuls of ice cream Chloe filled her sister in on the big fight over Brian O'Keefe.

Riley shook her head. "What a disaster."

"It gets worse," Chloe said. "Brian is secretly going out with both of them." She told Riley the details.

"Are you sure?" Riley asked.

"Positive."

"The *creep*," Riley muttered. "But how come you don't tell Tara and Quinn what's going on?"

"Lennon asked me the same thing on IM last night," Chloe said. "But I just can't! You should see how happy they both are. They'll be totally crushed if I tell them about Brian."

"They *need* to know what Brian is up to," Riley declared. "He's definitely not worth breaking up a friendship. No wonder you're freaking out."

"Right." Chloe half smiled as she spooned up some more ice cream. She knew Riley would understand that her friends mattered way more than any party. "I know that I have to tell them. I'm afraid if they stay mad for too long, they might never make up. There has to be a way to show them what's going on so that Brian comes off looking like the two-timer he is . . . and they don't end up angrier at each other!"

"Wait!" Riley said suddenly, her eyes sparkling. "Listen, when are Tara and Quinn's next dates with Brian?"

"I don't know. I can find out," Chloe said. "Why? Do you have an idea?"

"Don't I always?" Riley grinned. "And don't worry, this one's brilliant!"

Later that night Riley and Chloe hurried down the street together to get "evidence" of Quinn's latest date with Brian. "So where are we going exactly?" Riley asked.

"Quinn said Brian was taking her to the Java Jive Café," Chloe said. "It's not one of the regular hangouts,

which is probably why he's taking her there."

"Yeah," Riley agreed. "He doesn't want to be seen—or it might get back to Tara."

"Speaking of being seen," Chloe said. "I forgot to ask, how come you were eating lunch with Tom Melnick the other day?"

"Oh . . ." Riley shrugged. She didn't really want to tell her sister the whole story and have her freak out. After all, everything was under control. "We were just talking."

Chloe gave her a skeptical glance.

"Oh, all right. I'll tell you." Riley laughed. She explained about Tom and the tape and their fake "date." "I wasn't going to say anything until it was all over," she added. "And the tape was back in my hands."

Chloe stopped walking. "I hate to tell you, but it might *never* be 'all over'!"

"What do you mean?" Riley asked. "We're going on one date so his friends can see us out together, and then he's giving me back the tape. That's all."

Chloe shook her head. "I heard him with his friends in the hall yesterday, and he's, like, 'Riley' this and 'Riley' that, and, 'Riley's so much fun!'"

"Yeah? So?"

"I'm telling you, Tom is crushing on you in a major way," Chloe declared. "This is more than just going on one date with you. He wants you to be his *girlfriend*!"

[Riley: Uh-oh!]

"You mean, you don't think he'll give me back the tape?" Riley asked. "After the date?"

"I don't know," Chloe admitted. "But you can't be totally sure, can you?"

[Riley: Yikes, she's right! What happens if he doesn't give me the tape? I can't keep going out with him!]

"Well, if he wants to keep dating, I'll just tell him no," Riley declared.

"Yeah, but what about your tape?" Chloe asked. "I'm on that tape, remember? What if Tom decides to show it around because you won't keep going out with him? And what if V.P. Connor sees it? I really, really don't want him to see me imitating him!"

[Riley: Or hear Larry revealing himself as the West Malibu Belcher! Or have everybody see Quinn making fun of Ellie's parties. Or Tara drooling over guys. Or Charlie tripping off his skateboard. Or everyone else acting like complete jerks!]

Riley took a deep breath. "Listen, it's too soon to stress about this," she told her sister. "I mean, Tom might give me the tape, like he said he would."

"But what if he doesn't?" Chloe asked.

"Don't worry. I can handle it," Riley told her. "I'll come

up with a brilliant plan to get it back, that's all! In the meantime, let's put my first brilliant plan into action!"

Three minutes later they approached the Java Jive Café on Dune Road. Wearing their hoods up to cover their hair, they crept to the front window and peered around the blue neon cup-and-saucer sign.

"Good, it's busy," Riley whispered. "We can hide in the crowd. Do you see Quinn and Brian?"

"Yeah," Chloe whispered back. "Quinn's wearing a new yellow top. I think it's new, anyway. And she has on those cool beaded earrings."

Riley rolled her eyes. Trust Chloe to give her a fashion report! "Come on, let's do this!"

Jazz, laughter, and the sounds of a baseball game on the TV behind the counter filled the café. As Riley and Chloe took cover behind a group of kids standing in the entrance, Chloe nudged Riley. "That table, over by the end of the counter."

Riley stood on tiptoe and peered over someone's shoulders.

There they were, drinking cappuccinos and sharing a piece of carrot cake!

[Riley: And there's more bad news. They're holding hands and looking all lovey-dovey!]

"Are you ready?" Chloe whispered.

"Ready." Keeping her face turned aside, Riley made

her way around the tables and through the noisy crowd until she had a good view of Quinn and Brian.

Now for the most important part. Riley slipped the camcorder from her pocket, opened the tiny screen, and pushed the RECORD button.

On the screen, Quinn and Brian forked up carrot cake and smiled at each other, totally oblivious of what was going on around them. Behind their heads was the café's TV, showing that night's baseball game.

Perfect, Riley thought. She made sure to get the baseball game in the picture, so Tara would know exactly when this video was shot.

Just then Brian leaned back in his chair and said something. Quinn laughed and tossed her head. Then she leaned down for her bag.

Time to get out of here! Riley snapped the screen closed and scurried back to Chloe.

As they rushed outside, Riley gave her sister a thumbs-up. "One down!" She grinned. "One to go!"

chapter nine

Just before lunch on Thursday Riley hurried down the hall and sped around a corner.

Yes! There was Tom, opening his locker! If she could get a peek inside, she might see her tape. And she might be able to snatch it back before this whole thing got *way* out of control.

Crossing her fingers, Riley strolled on down the hall.

"Hi, Tom!" she called out in a cheery voice.

Tom whirled around. A shy smile spread across his face. "Hi, Riley. What's up?"

"Oh . . . not a lot," she said, wishing he'd move so she could check out his locker. "What's up with you?"

"I was just getting some stuff," he said. He bent down to his backpack, which sat on the floor near his feet.

Riley scanned the inside of his locker as quickly as

she could. The top shelf held a thick book. Another book sat on the bottom.

No videotape anywhere.

Tom straightened up, slinging his pack over one shoulder. "Are you, um, going to the cafeteria?" he asked.

"Not right this second," she said. "I've got to get to my locker first."

"Oh. Okay. Maybe I'll see you there." Tom hitched his pack up. "Bye, Riley."

"Bye."

Riley watched him walk away. Wait a second. The cafeteria was in the opposite direction. Where was he going?

Riley scurried after him as he rounded a corner and turned into one of the classrooms. She cautiously edged up to the open door and took a quick peek inside.

Yes! It was the room where the film club held their meetings. A*nd* kept their tapes! This had to be where he was hiding the tape!

Riley hid in the hallway and waited. In less than a minute Tom came out. As soon as he was out of sight, Riley slipped inside the classroom and rushed to the small metal bookcase where Tom had been standing. It was full of tapes. A lot of the tapes were too large to be hers, but there were plenty of mini digital tapes, too. Maybe hers was there.

Riley began searching through them. Green and yel-

low label, gold and black, rainbow, purple and orange—rats! She wanted purple and white.

Green and white, metallic gray, red and white, purple and orange again!

It has to be here! she thought, getting down on her knees to check the bottom shelf.

But it wasn't.

As she slipped the last tape back into place and stood up, Tom walked back in.

[Riley: Uh-oh. Okay, now. What possible excuse can I give Tom for being in the film club room? Think! Think!]

"Oh! Tom! Hi!" she managed.

"Hi, Riley," Tom replied. "Uh, what are you doing in here?"

"Oh, you mean in the film club room?" Riley asked. Still trying to come up with an excuse, she eyed his backpack. Now *that* was something she would love to get her hands on!

"I was looking for you," Riley said, pasting a big smile across her face. "I forgot to ask when I stopped at your locker. I wanted to make sure we're still on for tomorrow night."

"Gee, definitely," he said, blushing. "Hey, while you're here, you want me to show you a dynamite video? One of the seniors did a day-in-the-life documentary

about his part-time job pumping gas. It's really gritty."

"Wow, sounds fun." Riley pretended to be interested. How can I look inside his backpack? she kept wondering. Then it hit her—the perfect plan.

[Riley: Okay, maybe it isn't perfect, but it's all I have.]

"Listen, I've got to go," Riley said. "There's just one thing about Friday. Can we meet at your house?"

Tom nodded. "Really? Sure, that'll be great. I told my mom about you, and she wants to meet you."

"Cool," Riley said.

[Riley: Here's the plan: Once I'm inside his house, maybe I can get a look in his backpack. And if the tape's there, I'll take it, go out for a quick bite with him, and my worries will be over!]

"I look ridiculous," Chloe said to Riley, catching sight of her reflection in the window of the Java Jive Café.

It was after school. Chloe and Riley were sitting at a back table, getting ready to film part two of *Brian O'Keefe: the Secret Life of a Two-Timing Creep*.

Like her sister, Chloe wore shades and had her hair tucked up into an oversized baseball cap.

"The brim on this thing makes me look like a duck," Chloe declared, tucking a loose strand of wavy blond

hair under the yellow cap. "Oh, well, it hides most of my face. And I guess we're not here to make fashion statements."

"Right. We're here on a mission," Riley agreed. "But who knows? Maybe we'll start a trend."

Chloe glanced at Riley's blue cap with its huge brim and shook her head. "I don't think so."

Chloe checked her watch. According to Tara, who'd gushed on and on about her second date with Brian O'Keefe, she and Brian should be walking through the door any second now.

Taking a sip of her half-caff latte, Chloe glanced around. The place wasn't nearly as crowded as it had been the other night. A girl with purple-tipped blond hair sat at a table by herself, reading and taking notes. At another table two guys were playing chess in total silence. And that was it, except for the twenty-something guy working the counter.

And us, Chloe thought. The Carlson sisters, undercover.

The door opened. Tara's voice said, "Oh, this is a cute place!"

"It's them!" Chloe whispered. "Don't look up yet!" She and Riley slouched over their cups, hiding their faces.

Chloe sent a mental message to Tara and Brian. *Don't give us a second glance. We're just two girls with bad taste in hats and a serious interest in our lattes.*

Chairs scraped across the floor. Chloe risked a peek from under her hat.

Brian was just sitting down—at the same table he'd sat at with Quinn. Tara sat across from him, smiling dreamily as she watched him order cappuccinos and carrot cake.

[Chloe: One piece, two forks. Just like with Quinn. What a jerk!]

"Okay, here goes," Riley muttered. She shifted slightly in her chair and slid her bag a couple of inches across the table, exposing part of the camcorder. She adjusted the aim, then pushed RECORD.

Holding her breath, Chloe took another peek at Brian and Tara. They were holding hands now, smiling at each other. The television behind them was tuned to a news station. No sound, but the crawl along the bottom showed the date and time.

"Got it," Riley whispered. She slid her bag in front of the camcorder again.

Just then a huge group of kids barged through the door and headed for the tables. Perfect, Chloe thought. We won't be stuck waiting for Brian and Tara to leave.

Using the crowd as cover, Chloe and Riley made a fast exit.

"We did it!" Chloe pulled off her baseball cap and shook out her hair. "Now all we have to do is invite Quinn

and Tara to a private screening of our video exposé!"

"Plus take care of one more teensy problem," Riley said. "Tom Melnick."

Chloe groaned. "No tape yet?"

Riley shook her head. "But I bet it's in his backpack. Which will be at his house when we meet for our date tomorrow. So . . ."

"So? Oh, I get it!" Chloe said. "You're going to look for it! But how are you going to do that without his seeing you?"

Riley grinned. "That's where *you* come in, Chloe."

chapter ten

At eight minutes before six on Friday night, Manuelo pulled the car up in front of Tom's house on Sandy Hill Lane. Riley glanced at Chloe, who was in the backseat. "Wish me luck!" she said.

Chloe crossed her fingers. "Good luck!"

Then Riley turned to Manuelo. "Ready?"

"When you are," Manuelo replied.

"Thanks for doing this, Manuelo," Riley said as the two of them got out of the car and walked toward the house. "You're the greatest."

"I still cannot believe you've gotten yourself into this popsicle," Manuelo declared.

"Pickle," Riley corrected.

"Whatever." Manuelo shrugged. "But I am happy to help."

Riley grinned. Actually, once she'd told him about

Tom's request, Manuelo had insisted on not only driving her to the house but coming inside to make sure everything went okay. He'd basically volunteered to be her chauffeur and security guard for the evening!

Riley took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. Tom opened the door, wearing a *Lord of the Rings* T-shirt over tan cargos.

"Hi, Tom!" Riley said.

"Uh . . . hi." Tom seemed surprised to see Manuelo standing there.

"This is Manuelo Del Valle," Riley said. "He's a really good friend of our family. Manuelo, this is Tom Melnick."

The two shook hands.

"Manuelo had to pick up my sister somewhere, so he brought me over," Riley explained. "He offered to drive us, too, okay?"

"Sure, great," Tom said. "Come on in first and meet my mother."

As Riley and Manuelo entered the house, a woman with a friendly smile and the same reddish-brown hair as Tom hurried up to them.

"Hello!" she said. "I'm Pam Melnick, Tom's mother. You must be Riley!"

Tom introduced Manuelo and explained about Manuelo's offer to drive them. Riley was a little distracted as Tom talked. Where is that backpack? she wondered.

"All ready for your big night?" Mrs. Melnick asked her.

My big night? Yuck! Riley smiled politely and nodded. Meanwhile her mind was racing. Her gaze darted around the room. She didn't see the backpack anywhere.

"Actually, Mrs. Melnick, I was wondering if I could have something to drink first," she said. "My throat's really dry . . . and I keep coughing." Riley coughed twice.

"No problem. Just follow me to the kitchen," Mrs. Melnick replied.

Riley and Manuelo followed Tom and his mother past a wide stairway and through a large living room. Riley did a quick scan of the living room and almost screeched to a halt.

There was the backpack, sitting on one end of the couch!

Yes! Riley thought.

"What would you like? Juice? Water?" Tom asked, opening the refrigerator. "Root beer? Lime Sparkle?"

"Lime Sparkle, please," Riley said.

Manuelo sniffed, and his eyes widened. "Mrs. Melnick! Is it my imagination, or do I detect something baking?"

"You do!" Mrs. Melnick laughed. "Blueberry scones! I just put them in the oven. I make them at least once a month, and they go like . . . well, like hotcakes," she said, laughing again.

"Then you must be an expert," Manuelo said. "I don't suppose you'd share your recipe."

"Of course I would." She pulled a drawer open and took out an index card.

Riley smiled as Tom's mother led Manuelo into the den to discuss scones. If it had to do with cooking, Manuelo could talk forever! It was a good thing he'd insisted on coming along.

Tom brought Riley a glass of ice and a bottle of Lime Sparkle. He set them on the tile-topped island, gave Riley an eager smile, and went back to the refrigerator. As he pulled out a bottle of root beer, the phone rang.

Tom answered it quickly, as if he half expected a call. "It's Phil," he whispered to her, covering the mouthpiece. "I'll be off in a sec." Then he raised his voice and spoke into the phone. "Yeah, I really can't talk right now. I told you I was going out with Riley Carlson tonight, and she's here right now."

Great, Riley thought. He's broadcasting the news. It should be all over school in a matter of minutes.

Riley glanced at Manuelo and Mrs. Melnick. They were still deep into their scone discussion. Mouthing the word *bathroom* to Tom, Riley hurried toward the living room.

Back in the car, Chloe was getting nervous. What was taking them so long? She calmed herself with one thought: If anyone could get herself out of a predica-

ment like this, it was her sister, Riley. And, not to mention, Manuelo was with her!

As Chloe was channeling positive thoughts Riley's way, Riley was rifling through Tom's backpack.

Where *is* it? she asked herself, searching through one of the bag's compartments. The clock is ticking!

She could hear Manuelo and Mrs. Melnick in the den, still talking about recipes. They'd finished with scones and moved on to soufflés. And she heard Tom in the kitchen still bragging to Phil.

But it had already been a minute since Phil called. Guys really didn't talk on the phone much longer than that!

Keeping one ear cocked toward the kitchen, Riley unzipped another compartment of the backpack. Papers, pens, notebooks, a half-eaten candy bar.

No tape.

Three more compartments to go. Riley unzipped one of them and peered inside.

A calculator and some pencils. And something else. Was that it?

Riley stuck her hand in and came up with a bunch of eraser crumbs.

Okay, next compartment.

Riley grabbed a zipper pull, then paused, her heart pounding. She didn't hear Tom's voice anymore. He'd

stopped talking! Time to get back to the kitchen! She quickly zipped up the various backpack compartments and rushed from the living room.

"Hi!" she said, hurrying into the kitchen with a bright smile. "Sorry I took so long."

"That's okay," Tom told her. "I just got off the phone. So. Are you ready to go?"

Riley nodded. Ready or not, she didn't have much choice. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Well, later, I thought we could go to the Newsstand," Tom told her. "But for dinner, how about Japanese? Have you ever been to Mino's?"

Riley shook her head.

"It's great. I really hope you like it," he said. "We can order my favorites—raw octopus and sea urchin."

[Riley: Oh, yuck!]

Later that night Riley breathed a sigh of relief as she and Tom left the Newsstand. The date was finally over! All Tom's friends had seen them there together—apparently as a "couple."

"Hey, that was fun, wasn't it?" Tom asked.

[Riley: Actually, no. Especially the curious looks from all those kids in there who know I date Charlie. I can only imagine the gossip in school on Monday!]

"So," Riley said.

"So," Tom replied shyly.

Riley decided to get to the point. "About my tape. Can I please have it back now?"

Tom nodded and patted his jacket pocket. Then his expression changed. "Uh-oh. I didn't bring it with me," he mumbled.

"What? But, Tom, we had a deal!" Riley said. "One date, and you'd give me back my tape!"

"I know! I will, don't worry," Tom said. "But I just don't have it with me right now. I meant to get it, but Phil called, and I forgot. Could we, uh, meet at California Dream tomorrow night? I'll bring it then!"

"Another date?" Riley asked. Chloe had been right!

"Well, we don't have to call it a *date*, exactly," Tom said. "We can just meet there, and I'll give you back your tape, and if we get hungry, we can order burgers or something."

"I can't meet you tomorrow night," Riley told him. She took a deep breath. It was time to move forward with her backup plan. "See, my sister's throwing a huge beach party then. Do you . . . um . . . want to come?"

Tom's eyes lit up. "Yeah! Sure! That'll be great, Riley. What time?"

"Six-thirty."

Riley thought about her brilliant plan that was already underway, and she grinned. Thank goodness

she'd listened to Chloe! Her sister had been right about Tom.

"I'll be there," Tom promised. "And I'll definitely give you back your tape," he added.

I know you will, she thought to herself. I'm making sure of it right now!

chapter eleven

It was fifteen minutes after six on Saturday night, and Chloe was out on the deck with her mom and Manuelo.

"I never thought I'd say this, but we're actually done!" she announced excitedly. "Doesn't it look great?"

"It looks wonderful, sweetie," Macy declared.

Chloe grinned. The deck *did* look awesome. Strings of tiny lights in the shapes of starfish and sea horses were looped around the railings. There were citronella candles in colorful pails, seashells scattered on the long table, and a wicker trunk full of fluffy beach towels for the kids who forgot to bring one.

"I'll go find the candle-lighter," Macy said, heading back into the house.

"Thanks for your help, Mom!" Chloe called after her. "You, too, Manuelo!" Declaring that potato chips and cheese curls were *not* good enough for the party of the cen-

tury, Manuelo had prepared fancy beef and veggie burgers.

"Please, it was my pleasure," Manuelo insisted. "But now, with the party and music about to begin, I believe I'll go find my earplugs!"

Manuelo went inside, and Chloe took a last glance around the deck. Speakers in place, a stack of boogie boards by the stairs, a surfboard propped against one of the rails. And an extra grill, thanks to Larry, who'd wrestled it over from his house next door.

Just then Quinn came through the sliding door, wearing a bright red tank top and matching shorts. "Hi, I'm ready to . . ." She paused, staring at the decorations. "What's going on? I thought you wanted me to come early so I could help."

"Right," Chloe said.

[Chloe: Wrong. Mom and Manuelo helped me. I asked Quinn to come early so I could get her together with Tara. Of course, I had to promise Quinn that Tara wouldn't be here. And I had to tell Tara that Quinn wouldn't be around. Pretty sneaky, huh? I hope it works!]

"But everything's done," Quinn pointed out.

"Nah, it just *looks* that way," Chloe told her. "Take my word for it, there are still a zillion things to do. Like, um, bringing all the CDs out here. They're in the living room. Could you go get a bunch of them?"

"Sure." Quinn walked back inside.

Chloe counted to five, then rushed inside just in time to spot Tara coming through the front door in a cropped orange top and white shorts.

"Hi!" Chloe called out. "Come on into the living room and help me get some CDs."

Tara followed Chloe into the living room and stopped, glaring at Quinn.

Quinn glared back.

Not exactly a happy reunion, Chloe thought.

"You told me she wouldn't be here, Chloe," Tara said accusingly.

"And you told *me* that *she* wouldn't be here," Quinn declared.

"I'm leaving," Tara huffed.

"Me, too," Quinn said, dropping a pile of CDs onto the couch.

"Wait!" Chloe threw herself into the doorway to stop them. "Guys, listen. You can go if you want, but not yet. I really need you to stay and watch a movie with me."

Quinn frowned. "A *movie*?"

"You want to watch a movie *now*?" Tara shook her head, confused. "I don't get it."

"You will," Chloe promised. "Please, guys, just sit down and watch."

After a few more seconds of scowling at each other, Chloe's friends sat down. Quinn perched on one end of

the couch. Tara sat on a chair as far from Quinn as she could get and still be able to see the TV.

Chloe took the remote from the coffee table and clicked on the television. She'd connected the camcorder to the TV so she could play the *Two-Timing Creep* tape for her friends.

Quinn gasped as the image came up. "That's me and Brian at the Java Jive Café! Chloe, you filmed us?"

"Actually, Riley did, but I was there," Chloe admitted. "Check out the TV in the background. The Angels and the Yankees. Wednesday night."

Tara scowled at Quinn. "How could you go out with Brian again when you *know* he's dating me now? I can't believe you're trying to take him away."

"What are you *talking* about?" Quinn demanded.

"Wait!" Chloe called out. She quickly fast-forwarded the tape. "Now watch this. Same place. Same action. But with a major cast change."

Up came the scene with *Tara* and Brian at the Java Jive. In the background was the café's television with the date—Thursday—crawling across the bottom.

Quinn stood up. "So I'*m* trying to take Brian away, huh?" she asked Tara, pointing to the television screen. "What are *you* doing?"

Tara jumped to her feet. "He asked me out!"

"Well, he asked *me* out, too!" Quinn declared.

"I don't believe you," Tara insisted.

[Chloe: And I thought once I showed them the tape, they'd figure out what Brian was up to! I guess they're both too mad to think straight. Fortunately, I'm ready to spell it all out for them!]

"Guys, you're both missing the point!" Chloe cried, shutting off the TV and camcorder.

Quinn and Tara stopped glaring at each other and started glaring at Chloe.

[Chloe: Yikes! I'd better talk fast, before they get mad at *me*!]

"Don't you get it?" Chloe asked. "Brian is the one you should be mad at! He's secretly going out with both of you!"

Chloe looked at Quinn. "After your first date, he told Tara you weren't his type. Then he went out with *her*. Then *you* told me he'd asked you out again. That definitely made me suspicious." She pointed to the television. "And I was right."

"Brian lied to me," Tara murmured.

"He's been lying to both of you," Chloe said. She looked at Quinn. "I bet he never said one word to you about Tara, did he?"

Quinn shook her head.

"See what I mean?" Chloe asked. "Maybe Brian's cute, but he's also a liar. And a two-timer. And a creep! You can't let somebody like him ruin your friendship!

He isn't worth it. Friends should always come first!"

Chloe stopped and took a deep breath. Please, she silently urged Quinn and Tara. Please make up!

A minute went by. Then Tara glanced at Quinn. "Chloe's right," she murmured.

Quinn nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, Tara."

"Me, too!" Tara replied.

The two girls hugged each other. Then they grabbed Chloe and hugged *her*.

Chloe felt her heart lift.

[Chloe: Yes! I did it! Am I awesome, or what? Well, actually, Riley deserves the credit for this one. Remind me to thank her later for her unbelievably brilliant plan!]

"I should never have gone out with him!" Quinn said to Tara. "I knew you liked him. But I honestly didn't get it that he was your number one choice!"

"He's not anymore!" Tara laughed. Then she gasped. "Omigosh! I almost forgot—Brian is coming to the party!"

"That's right!" Quinn said. "Well, I plan to totally freeze him out."

"I think I'll yell at him," Tara said. "Don't worry, Chloe. I won't make a scene at the party. I just wish there was *some*thing I could do!"

"Yeah, there has to be a way to teach Brian a lesson," Quinn agreed. "He messed with the wrong girls!"

"I've been thinking about that," Chloe said with a grin. "Come on upstairs while I change, and we can work it all out!"

[Chloe: I have a few brilliant plans of my own, you know!]

At six-thirty Riley opened the front door and smiled at Tom. "Hi. Come in."

"Hi." Tom stepped inside. He was dressed for the party in flip-flops and a gray T-shirt over baggy blue swimming trunks. Slung over one shoulder was his backpack, with a beach towel poking out of it.

Riley was dressed for the party, too, in white cotton shorts and a pink tank top with her shimmery silver tankini underneath. But she couldn't even *think* about partying yet.

"Where is everybody?" Tom asked, glancing around. "Out on the deck?"

"No one else is here yet," Riley told him. "The party doesn't start until seven."

"I thought you said six-thirty."

"I did," Riley replied, leading him into the living room. "I wanted you to come early because I have something special to show you." She walked over to the coffee table and picked up the television remote. "It's a movie. I think you'll find it very interesting."

Tom's eyes lit up. "Great! What is it?" he asked. "Fantasy? Sci-fi? An oldie? Silent?"

"This movie is definitely not old," Riley replied. "Or silent. In fact, it has some superfascinating dialogue."

"Cool," Tom said, flopping onto the couch. "Let's see it."

Riley aimed the remote at the television. The screen flickered. Then an image appeared.

"Who are those people?" Tom asked. "Is that Brian O'Keefe?"

Riley looked at the screen to see Tara and Brian at the Java Jive Café.

Oops. Wrong tape.

"Uh, yes," she said. "But that's not what I wanted to show you." She removed Chloe's tape from the camcorder and slid hers in. Then she hit the camcorder's PLAY button.

The screen flickered. Then an image appeared. It was Riley and Tom, sitting at a table in Mino's last night. Between them was a plate filled with pieces of slimy gray rubber.

[Riley: That's the raw octopus, which Tom scarfed down like candy. I tried not to watch. (I know, I know, I should try everything, but my stomach was not up for the adventure.) Anyway, see how I keep glancing to one side? There's a low partition next to our table. It's planted with

ferns and baby palms and bonsai trees. Oh, yeah, and Mom's camcorder. Chloe put it there. You can't see her, but she's on the other side of the partition! She taped the whole thing! I kept thinking I could talk sense into Tom about getting my tape back. Well, you know how *that* went. Luckily, I had a backup plan, just in case!]

On the TV screen, Tom frowned at Riley's plate. "Is that all you're going to eat? A few bites of rice?"

The real Tom, sitting in Riley's living room watching the "reel" Tom on TV, leaned forward. His jaw fell open in disbelief.

"Rice is extremely filling," Riley was saying on tape. Then she pushed her plate aside. "May I ask you something?"

Tom chewed on a piece of octopus and nodded.

"You took my time capsule tape to get me to go out with you, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Tom admitted, embarrassed. "I told you, once I lied to my friends about dating you, I couldn't think of any other way to make it happen. I knew you wouldn't go out with me if I just asked."

"Honestly? You're right," Riley said.

"See? I knew it," Tom said.

"But, Tom, it's not because of *you*," Riley told him. "You're a nice guy, but I already have a boyfriend."

"But we're having fun right now, aren't we?" Tom

asked. "I mean, I can tell you don't like the octopus, but that's okay! We'll get some dessert at the Newsstand. And all my friends will see you with me, right?"

Riley nodded. "And after that you'll give me back my tape?"

Tom stared at his plate, his face flushing.

Riley pressed STOP and glanced at Tom on the sofa.

Tom looked blown away. Even though the TV was off, he continued staring at the blank screen. "You . . .you taped us?" he stammered.

"I didn't want to," Riley told him. "But I was afraid you'd keep my tape so you could keep dating me. And I was right. Last night after the Newsstand, you *still* wouldn't give it to me. And I really, really want it back!"

"But that was a mistake—I told you!" Tom pleaded. "So . . . what are you going to do?"

"Well, I could show *this* tape to your friends—" Riley began.

"No, don't do that!" Tom opened his backpack. He dug out Riley's tape and held it out to her. "I'm sorry, Riley. I really was going to give it back to you."

Riley took the tape and checked the purple and white label. Yes! It was hers!

"Riley?" Tom gestured toward the television. "You're not going to, uh, show that restaurant tape to the guys or anyone else, are you?"

Riley knew he'd be worried about that. So worried

that he'd give back the time capsule video. And the plan had worked! Actually, Riley had no intention of ever showing the restaurant tape to anyone.

"Here." She took the restaurant tape from the camcorder and handed it to Tom. "It's yours."

Tom picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "I guess I'll get going," he said. "And, Riley? After what I did, you were really cool about the whole thing. Thanks." Tom walked out of the living room. A few seconds later Riley heard the front door shut.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief.

[Riley: I did it! I can't believe it worked! How awesome was *that*?]

Manuelo appeared in the living room doorway, carrying a huge stack of paper plates. "Ah, Riley, there you are! Your suitor has been searching high and low for you."

"My what?" Riley asked.

"Suitor." Manuelo grinned. "Translation: *boyfriend*."

Manuelo hurried off, and Charlie Slater walked in.

Charlie! Riley's heart leaped. She hurried over and threw her arms around him. "I'm really, really glad to see you!" she cried.

"Me, too." Charlie laughed, hugging her, too. "I feel like I haven't seen you all week!"

"You're early," she said, looking up at him. "That wasn't a complaint, you understand."

"Good. I came early because I missed you," he said, blushing a little.

Riley's heart leaped again. "I missed you, too," she replied with a smile.

Charlie suddenly noticed the tape and remote in Riley's hand. "How come you're in here watching TV?" he asked. "I thought you'd be helping Chloe get ready for the big party."

"I should be, but. . ." Riley paused.

[Riley: Okay, I guess I should tell him the whole story. But not now! Right now I just want to celebrate getting back my tape. Most of all I'd like to forget about Tom!]

"I thought I'd lost my time capsule tape," Riley told him. "But I've got it back now."

"No worries, huh?" Charlie asked.

Riley grinned. "No worries. I'll fill you in on the four-one-one later, okay?"

Charlie tightened his arms around her.

"No problem," he said.

Riley closed her eyes and felt his lips on hers. As they kissed, the little tingle of happiness turned into a sizzle. And she really, truly, and totally forgot all about what's-his-name.

chapter twelve

"Awesome party!" Lennon Porter said to Chloe as they danced together on the deck later that night.

Chloe smiled at her boyfriend. Lennon had returned from the debate club trip early that morning. "It's the party of the century!" she declared.

It was nine o'clock, and the party was in full swing. Music poured from the speakers. Kids danced and ate and trooped back and forth from the deck to the beach. It was too dark to swim anymore, but lots of kids were making sand sculptures or tossing glow-in-the-dark Frisbees.

Chloe had changed from her swimsuit into low-rise capris and a copper-colored halter. She felt great. Not only were the Three Musketeers back, but so was Lennon. She was so glad to see him! The debate team had come in third in the state, so he was really happy. He was also

as sweet as ever and extremely cute in his lime-green T-shirt and tan cargo shorts.

Smiling, Chloe danced close to him, then spun away. As she did, she glanced over the deck rail and saw Riley and Charlie. They were strolling along the beach, holding hands.

Chloe grinned. Everything's back to normal, she thought.

Then she saw Brian O'Keefe striding along the sand, heading up toward the house and looking not bad in black shorts and a baby-blue T-shirt.

This is it! Chloe thought. She turned to Lennon. "I have a couple of things to do, okay?"

"Sure. Need help?"

"No thanks," Chloe told him, giving him a quick kiss.

Lennon started talking to a group of kids. Chloe hurried over to Tara and Quinn, who were standing next to one of the grills. "Brian has arrived!" she reported.

"Where is he?" Quinn asked, glancing around.

"The beach," Chloe said. "Tara, you're up first."

Tara grinned. "This is going to be fun! See you guys in a couple of minutes!" She hurried to the stairs and trotted down to the sand.

Chloe and Quinn ducked behind the surfboard propped against the deck railing. Chloe peered around its edge. "There's Tara! Brian sees her!"

Quinn peeked out from the other side of the tall

board and giggled. "Look at his face! He's definitely surprised!"

"Wait until he sees *you*!" Chloe told her.

[Chloe: Since we couldn't tar and feather Brian, we decided to set a little trap. Tara and Quinn both called him and said they wouldn't be at the party. Which I'll bet didn't bother him, because he probably thought he'd just find a *third* girl to date! But now Tara's telling him that she made it after all. Then it'll be Quinn's turn. And then—I can't wait!]

Chloe watched as Tara talked to Brian. Brian had gotten over his surprise by now. As Tara leaned close to him and whispered something, he smiled and nodded. He looked totally confident.

That's because he doesn't know what's coming, Chloe thought.

Down on the beach Tara touched Brian's arm, gave him a flirty little wave, and hurried toward the deck stairs. In just a few seconds she joined Chloe and Quinn behind the surfboard.

"What did you tell him?" Chloe asked.

"I said I'd had a flu bug," Tara reported, "but it was only a two-hour thing, so I got to come after all."

Chloe laughed. "He bought a two-hour flu?"

Tara nodded. "*And* he thinks we're going for a nice,

romantic walk on the beach in just a couple of minutes."

"Perfect," Quinn said, scooting out from behind the board. "Now it's my turn. I'm going to suggest another visit to the Java Jive Café."

Chloe gave Quinn a thumbs-up. "Go, girl!"

Quinn hurried to the deck stairs.

Chloe peered down at Brian. He was looking around, waving to some of the kids on the beach. "He's waiting for you," she said to Tara.

"I told him I had to go to the bathroom first," Tara said. "That's always a good excuse!"

Chloe laughed, still watching Brian. "Ooh, there's Quinn! Now for the really fun part!"

From the deck Chloe and Tara watched Quinn run toward Brian. When Brian saw her, his mouth dropped open.

"I would love to hear this," Tara said.

"Me, too." Chloe grinned. Brian was trying to look cool, but he kept glancing nervously toward the deck stairs. "He's afraid you're going to come back any second now. Look, he's starting to sweat."

"I say he deserves it," Tara declared.

Suddenly Brian grabbed Quinn's hand and started pulling her along the beach. He was obviously trying to get her away from the party before Tara returned.

"Let's go!" Chloe cried. She and Tara slipped from behind the surfboard and rushed down the deck stairs

to the beach. They ran toward Quinn and Brian.

"Brian!" Tara called out. "Brian!"

Brian spun around.

[Chloe: I'll never forget the look on Brian's face right now! His eyes are as big as saucers and his face is totally white! Too bad I don't have the camcorder with me!]

"I'm ready for our walk now, Brian," Tara said.

"What walk?" Quinn asked Tara, as if she didn't know. "Brian and I are going to the Java Jive Café. Right, Brian?"

"No, he was waiting for me," Tara said. "We're taking a nice long walk together. Right, Brian?"

Brian gulped.

[Chloe: Trapped like the rat you are, Brian!]

Tara and Quinn stared at him. Then at each other. Then they burst out laughing.

"Forget it, Brian," Quinn told him. "Tara and I both know what's going on."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Chloe rolled her eyes. Brian was going for the innocent act.

"We know you've been dating both of us—and lying about it," Tara told him. "We have a witness."

"Chloe saw everything," Quinn added. "At the Java Jive Café. First with me. Then with Tara."

Brian looked at Chloe.

Chloe nodded. "I know everything, too. Like how you told Tara that Quinn wasn't your type. And then the very next day, Quinn told me you asked her out again. I thought that was kind of weird."

"That was a really rotten thing to do to us," Tara said.

"Nobody likes a liar," Quinn told him.

[Chloe: And nobody messes with me and my girls!]

Brian cleared his throat. "I, um . . . you . . . uh, I . . ." he sputtered.

"Oh, so that's your excuse?" Tara asked.

"Good one!" Quinn joked.

Brian stared at the ground.

Tara put her hands on her hips. "The next words out of your mouth had better be I'*m sorry*!" she said, giving him her best I-mean-business look.

"I am," Brian replied, still staring at the ground.

"You are *what*?" Quinn asked, looking every bit as intense as Tara.

"I'm sorry!" Brian said, lifting his head. "Really." He grabbed his beach bag and towel. "I'll get going," he added.

"Don't let *us* stop you," Tara said.

"Yeah, maybe you can still make it to Java Jive

before closing," Quinn added. "I hear their carrot cake is to die for!"

Without another word Brian left.

The girls exchanged smiles.

Time to party down!

Half an hour later the party was still going strong. Chloe danced with Lennon, then went down to the bottom level of the deck to get some munchies.

"Great party, Chloe!" Sierra cried, dancing by in short-shorts and a purple halter.

"Awesome party," Larry agreed, also heading for the stairs. He wore a neon-green swimsuit, a straw hat, and huge bubblegum-pink flippers. "Hey, come on down to the beach. They're gonna bury me in the sand. Only up to my neck, of course. And down to my flippers. You can help."

"Gee, that sounds like fun, but maybe later, Larry." Chloe grinned at him as he clomped on down the stairs. Then she hurried to the munchies table and grabbed a handful of chips before they all disappeared.

Quinn and Tara joined her at an empty spot on one side of the deck.

"Chloe, this is such a cool party," Tara said. "And we're really sorry for not helping."

"It wasn't fair of us," Quinn said.

Chloe smiled. "That's okay," she told them. "You were both kind of stressed."

Just then Riley appeared with the camcorder and started taping.

"Oh, no!" Tara cried. "Spielberg is at it again!"

"Hasn't that thing caused enough trouble already?" Quinn asked with a laugh.

Riley lowered the camera. "Come on, guys. I've got a *new* plan!"

Chloe rolled her eyes, then licked some potato chip crumbs from the corners of her mouth. "Riley, are you sure you want to tape tonight?" she asked.

"Yup!" Riley said. "It's going to be part of my *new* time capsule video."

"What about the old one?" Tara asked.

"I'm tossing it," Riley told her. "I mean, you all came off acting like a bunch of goofballs. I guess it was my fault, because I encouraged you to really ham it up. Anyway, I don't want people in the future to believe that's what we're really like. Because we're not."

Chloe understood. "You want something we can be proud of, right?"

"Exactly," Riley said. "Something everybody at West Malibu can be proud of. So I decided to start with your party, Chloe. It's definitely pride-worthy. Are you ready?"

"Ready!" Chloe stepped between Tara and Quinn and flung her arms around their shoulders.

Riley pushed the RECORD button.

"Hi, my name is Chloe Carlson," Chloe said with a

smile. "I'm standing here with Tara Jordan and Quinn Reyes. They're two of my best friends. There's a fourth person here with us, but you can't see her because she's shooting the video, which was her brilliant idea, by the way. I'm talking about my sister." Chloe walked toward the camera and took it from Riley. She pointed it at her twin and kept talking. "Her name is Riley Carlson. And she is my *very* best friend!"

Riley quickly fixed her hair, then she smiled for the camera.

"Right back at you, sis!" she said with a grin.

mary-kateandashley

Real Books for Real Girls™

TM & © 2004 Dualstar Entertainment Group, LLC

get real

- ☑ Videotape your friends spilling all their secrets.
- ☑ Freak out when some guy in school finds the tape and threatens to show the whole school!
- ☑ Find out that your best friend's boyfriend is secretly dating your other best friend.
- ☑ Teach both guys a lesson!

Chloe and Riley Carlson . . .
So much to do . . .

so little time

$4.99 US / $6.99 CAN

ISBN 0-06-059514-0

0 99455 00499 2 59514 UPC

www.mary-kateandashley.c

It's What YOU Read

HarperEntertainme
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
www.harpercollins.com

PARACHUTE PRESS

DUALSTAR PUBLICATIONS

3 15 69988 369